

Nepal's Heritage

—C. R. Swaminathan

इदमन्धतमः कृत्स्नं ज्ञायेत भुवनत्रयम् ।
यदि शब्दाह्वयं ज्योतिरासंसारं न दीप्यते ॥

"This entire Universe would have been shrouded in pitch darkness if only the torch of knowledge in the form of belles-letters had not illuminated it to the farthest ends (or until eternity)". So said poet Dandin in his Kavyadarsa. Recording of human experience with a view to transmitting the knowledge contained in it has been in vogue ever since the dawn of civilization. There was a time when man used crude neolithic implements to draw signs and symbols on rocks to represent his thoughts. He has now progressed to the stage of perpetuating his thoughts along with his voice by recording them in narrow strips of tapes. These two stages were intervened by a series of experiments in perfecting the methods of transmission and preservation of knowledge; in which copper plates, leather, tree-barks, palm leaf, Bhurja leaf and a variety of papers were used. At each stage there were attempts to embellish and beautify the records with an artistic touch and each generation produced specially qualified scribes to do this job. Besides considering transmission of knowledge as a great act of merit or *Punya*, by identifying with Lord Ganesa, the first scribe who helped Vyasa the author of the Mahabharata, to record his epic, the profession of the scribe, assumed dignity and sanctity.

In those regions of the Orient where Hinduism and Buddhism held their sway, innumerable thought-currents in the fields of metaphysics, religion, sciences, sociology, law and literature were released by every succeeding generation and it soon rendered it impossible to contain them all in human memory. As a result the privilege of being learnt by hearing and memorizing was reserved exclusively for the Vedas, whose recording in script was considered a taboo; for that reason the Vedas came to be known as 'Sruti' or that which is to be learnt by hearing.

The materials used by the ancients as base for recording, and the pigments and tools they designed for writing and inscribing on them, speak volumes of their farsightedness in so far as these records have withstood the ravages of time and much of them has come down to us, often in spite of human neglect. We in the twentieth century, who can afford to boast of belonging to the scientific age and rational outlook, who believe in our capacity to mould the future of human society from out of the present with the help of a knowledge of the past, and who are equipped with the means and material to preserve our heritage for posterity, will be failing in our duty and disowning all claim for civilization, if we do not collect, preserve and study the recorded wisdom of our ancestors and utilise them to the extent to which our present development enables us.

us to use them and bequeath intact both the used and the unused parts of that wisdom to posterity; because it is quite probable that what seems to be of no use to us in the present, might assume new importance in the changed context of a distant future.

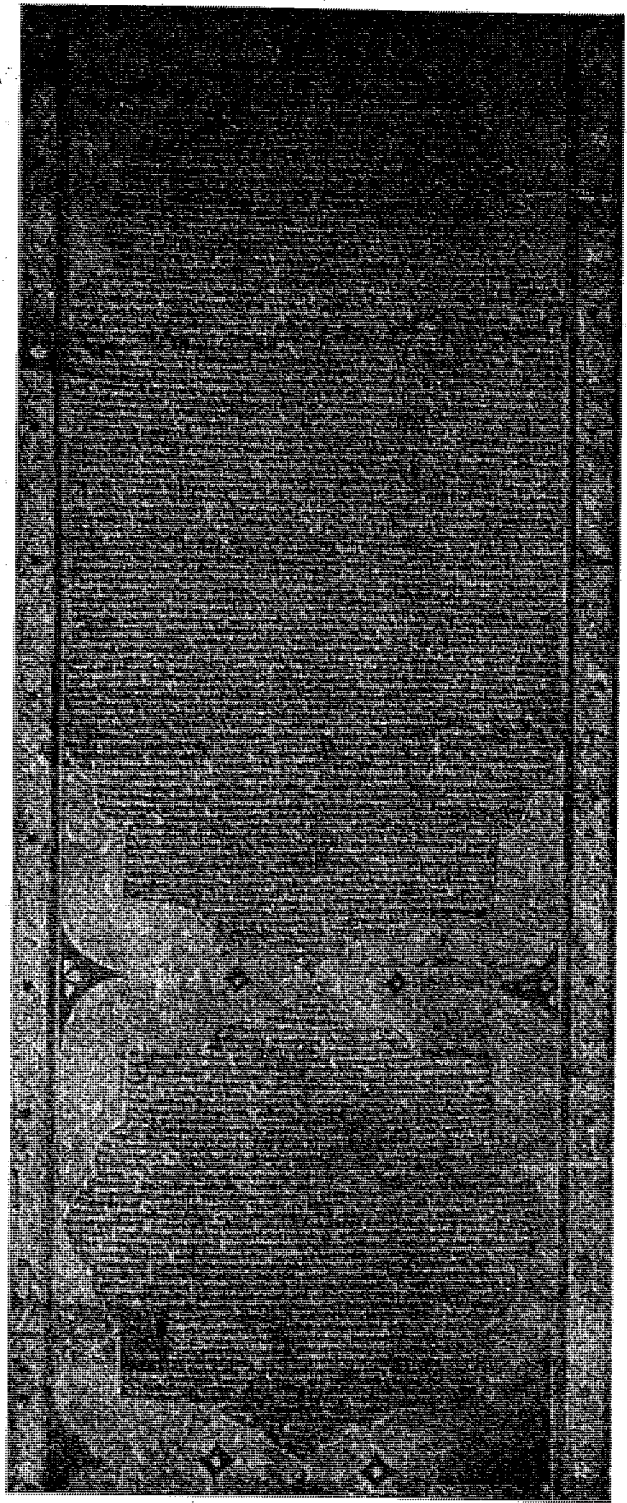
We have such recorded knowledge in Nepal in the form of innumerable manuscripts, copper plates and inscriptions which are yet to be mobilised, examined, catalogued and studied; the baffling richness of which at times renders one diffident of the meager material and human resources that are available to explore them. Pioneers in the fields of manuscript collection and manuscriptology like Col. Mackenzie, Haraprasad Sastri, Ganganath Jha, K. P. Jayaswal, Ganapathy Sastri, Swami Visweswarananda and R. G. Bhandarkar, in spite of their missionary zeal, could not complete their work in India during their lifetimes. Therefore, one has to approach this problem in Nepal with utmost humility and spirit of service, relying upon the dictum of the Gita:

“ स्वल्पस्यैव धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ॥ ”

Historically, Nepal was not subject to frequent foreign invasions nor was it easily accessible to outsiders. Except for Tibetans and Indians who happened to visit this country for purposes of trade, pilgrimage and education, it was almost a closed book for others. Even when political vivisection and internal quarrels took place among the ruling chieftains, the academic and religious traditions were rarely affected. Moreover Nepal has served as the safe repository of cultural treasures of North India and China when these two regions were subject to frequent political upheavals. Above all, it had enjoyed for a long time a tradition of benevolent monarchy which was purely guided by religious and Dharmic principles. All the

above circumstances have conferred on this Himalayan kingdom the unique position as the inheritor of a long and unbroken tradition of recorded literature, which if properly analysed and re-interpreted, is bound to provide the missing links in the cultural history of Asia. Such a study is also urgently called for to bring closer the peoples of this part of the globe who are at present divided by political or ideological barriers.

As a *sine qua non* for using the vast number of manuscripts and records that have been brought under the single roof of the newly constructed National Archives of Nepal, compilation of detailed catalogues and indices of the material has to be undertaken in a scientific way. Even among the educated, one often comes across persons who think that indexing is a purely mechanical work and cataloguing is the job of the less qualified or the less intelligent. This is a wrong notion which has to be got rid of lest this important item of work should fail to get its due attention. Indexing requires an all-round knowledge of the various subjects with a fairly discriminatory intellect to suppress the less important information about a book or record and project such details about it which would enable a scholar to evaluate its literary or scientific worth at one glance. A person in charge of indexing has ample scope for discrimination and condensation and he is expected to briefly state what is hidden in the verbiage of the text. The particulars that find entry into the index or catalogue are to be so arranged as to force the reader to draw an inference. Unless the indexer or the cataloguer takes the trouble of understanding the work at least in some detail, he will not be in a position to gather the relevant information to be included in the index.

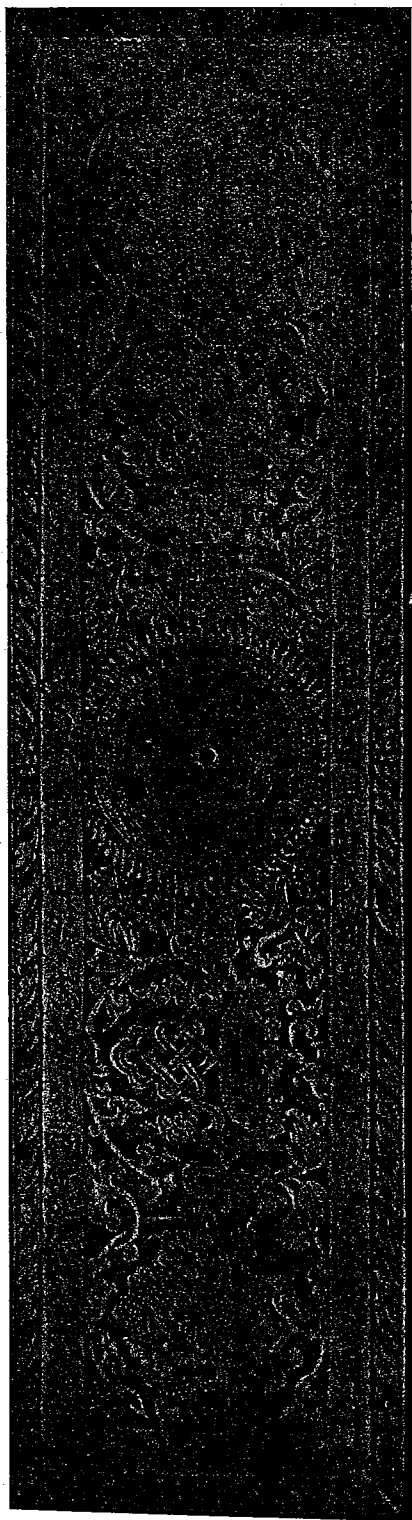


A. Illustrated paper manuscript of the Mahabharata.

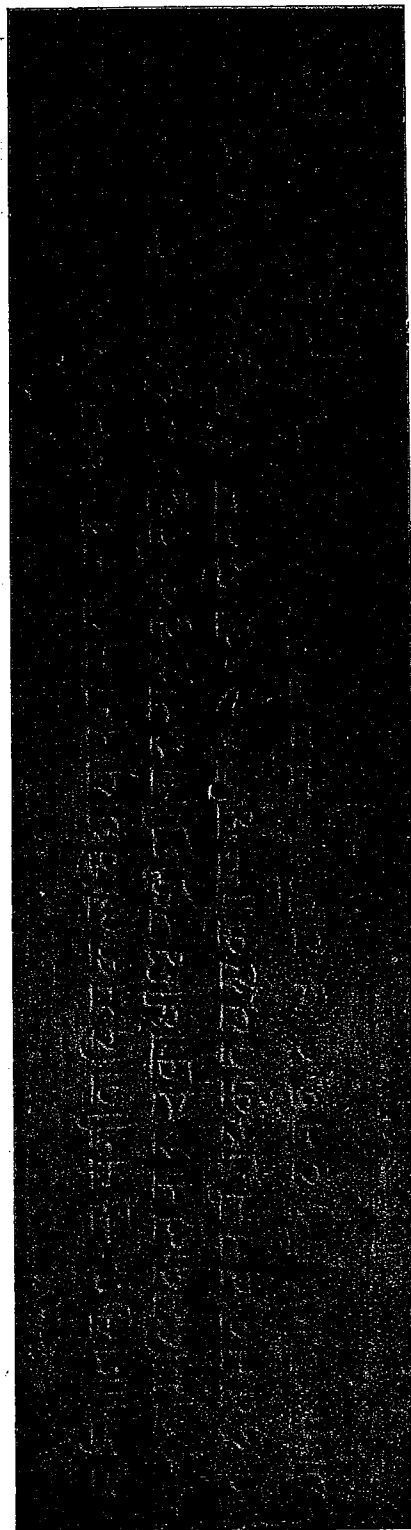
क. कागजमा लेखिएको सचित्र महाभारत ।

B. Illustrated paper manuscript of the Mahabharata
in diminutive lettering.

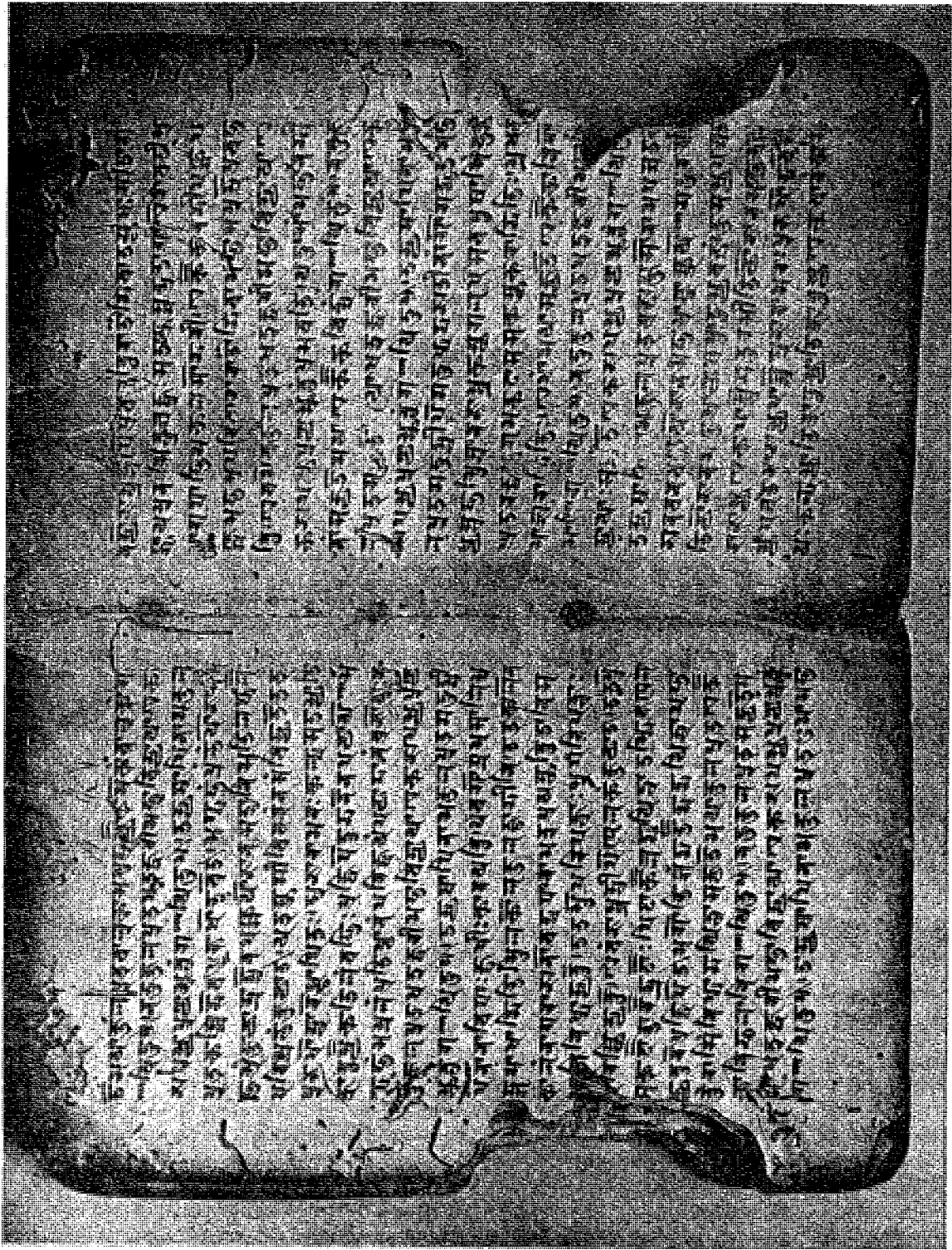
ख सानो अक्षरमा लेखिएको सचित्र महाभारत ।



A. Inscribed ivory cover of manuscript, upper side.
क. हस्तलिखित ग्रन्थकालागि हस्तिहाडको गाता, माथिल्लो भाग ।

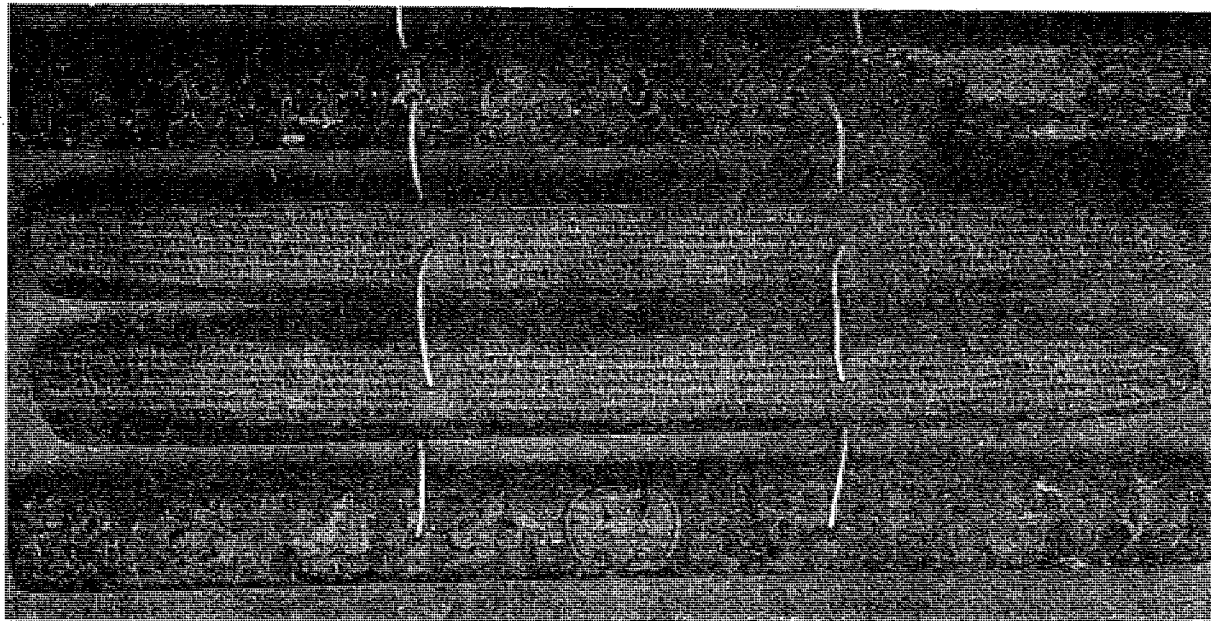


B. Inscribed ivory cover of manuscript, inner side.
ख. हस्तलिखित ग्रन्थको अभिलेखयुक्त हस्तिहाडको गाता, भित्री भाग ।

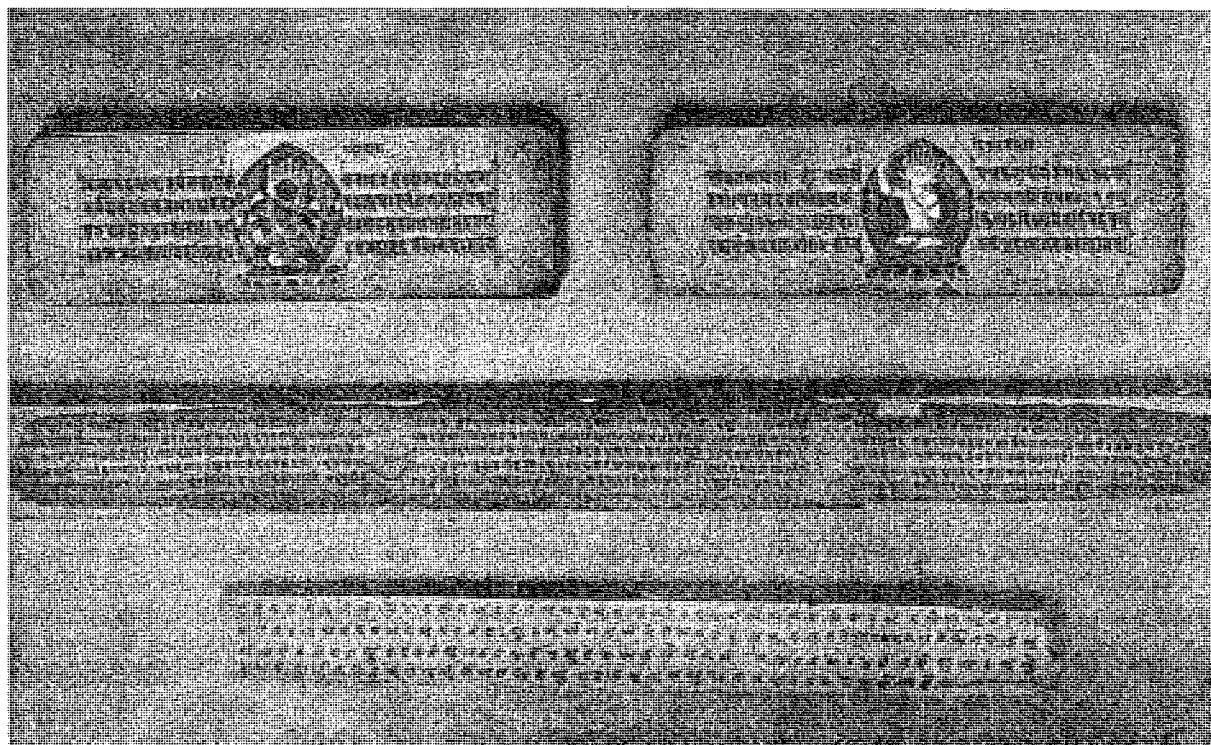


Paper Manuscript in the Lichhavi script.

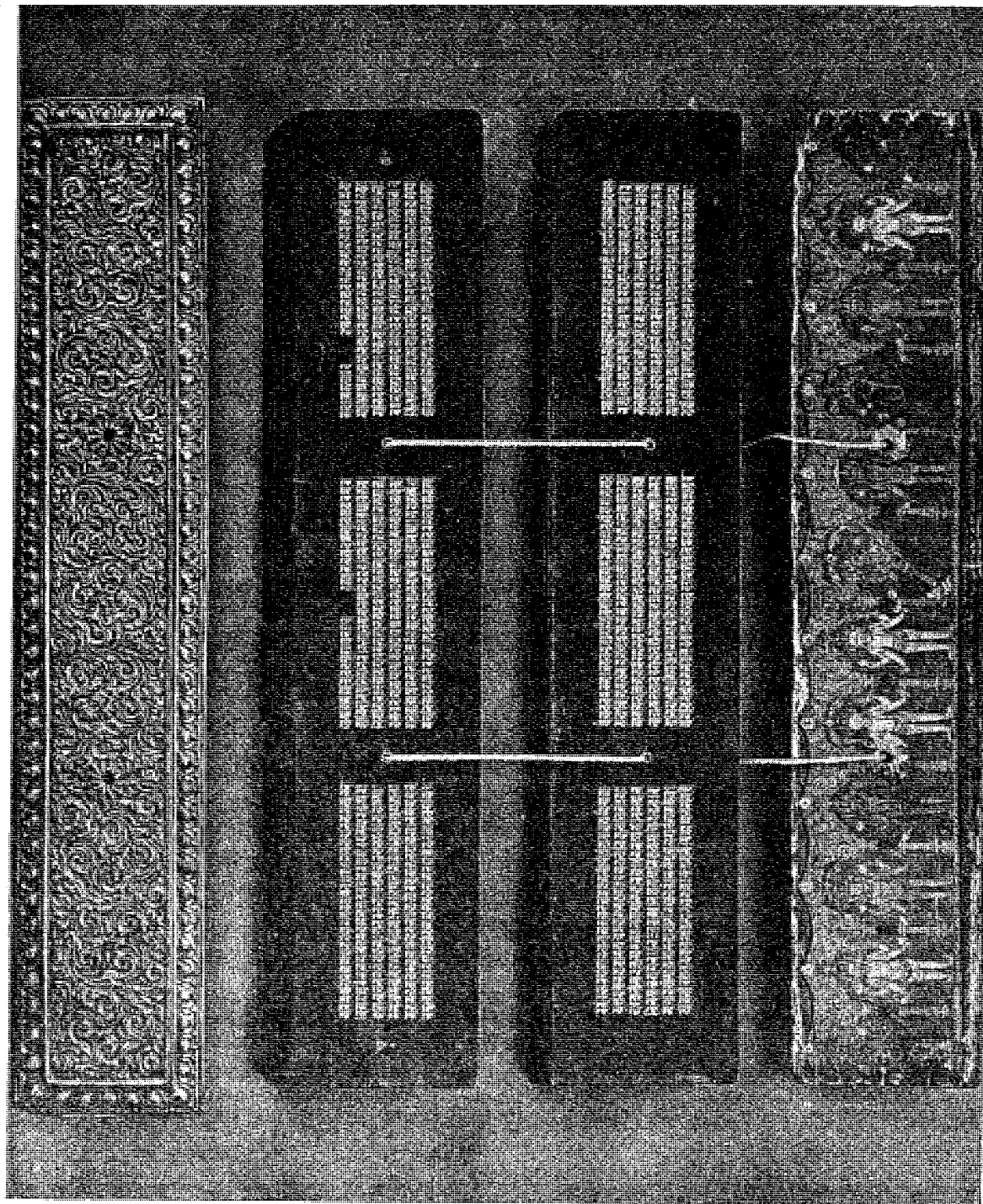
लिच्छवि लिपिमा कागजको हस्तलिखित ग्रन्थ ।



A. Illustrated palm-leaf manuscript with wooden covers.
 क. काष्ठगाता सहित सचित्र हस्तलिखित ग्रन्थ, ताड पत्र ।



B. Top row : illustrated paper manuscript Lower row : palm-leaf manuscripts.
 ख. माथिल्लो भाग : कागजको सचित्र हस्तलिखित ग्रन्थ तल्लो भाग : ताडपत्रका हस्तलिखित ग्रन्थ ।



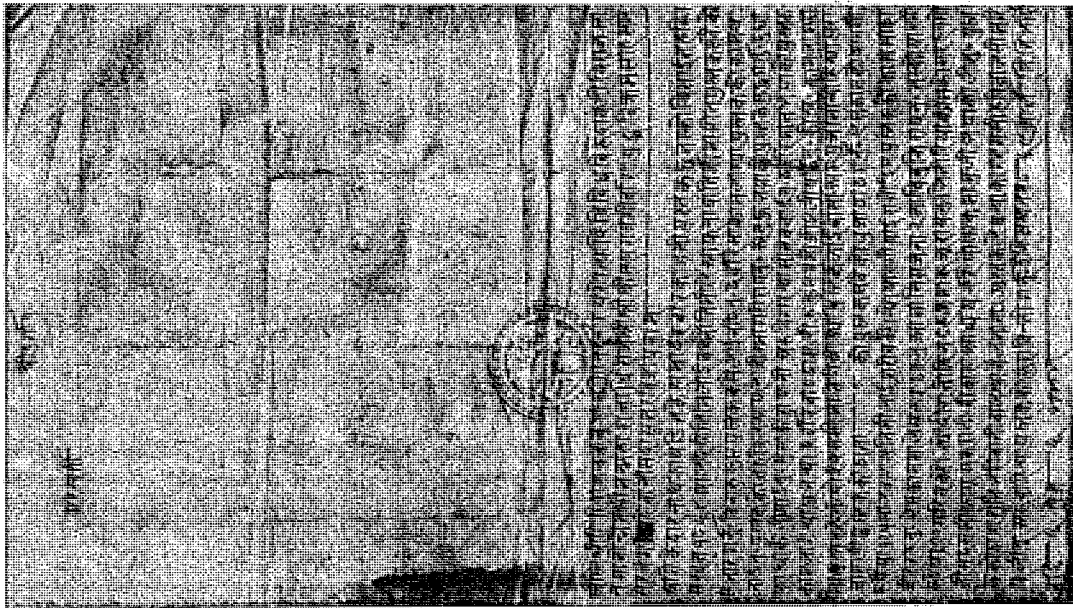
Illustrated paper manuscript of the Vishnu Dharma Purana with covers,
गाता सहित कायजमा लेखिणको सचित्र 'विष्णुधर्म पुराण' ।



A. Estampage of Lichchhavi inscription in stone.
 क. प्रस्तरमा अंकित लिच्छविकालीन अभिलेखको प्रतिरूप ।

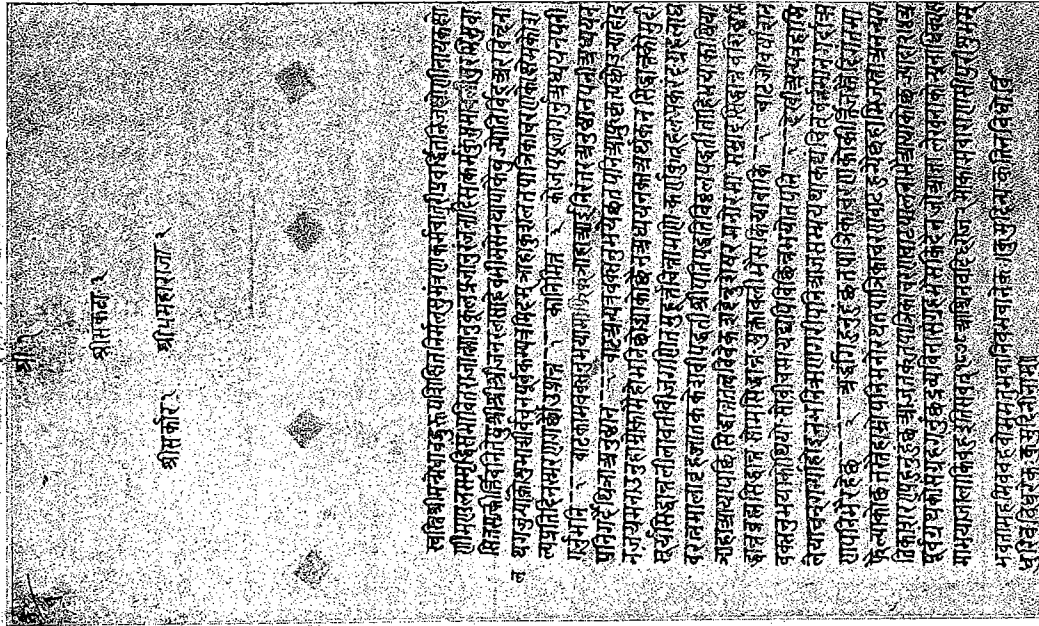


B. Estampage of stone inscription of Rajadeva.
 ख. प्रस्तरमा अंकित राजदेवका अभिलेखको प्रतिरूप ।



A: Lal Mohar of King Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shah regarding the library and library service.

क. श्री ५ गीर्वाण युद्धविक्रम शाहको पुस्तकालय व्यवस्था संबंधी लाल मोहर ।



B. Letter from Arabinda Nath Gajuryal, from Varanasi, to Bhimasena Thapa.

ख. अरविन्द नाथ गजुचालले वाराणसीबाट भीमसेन थापालाई लेखेको पत्र ।

As regards collecting the records and manuscripts that are still in the custody of private parties, a proposal is already under consideration of His Majesty's Government to organize a peripatetic party to comb the interior of the country. Such of the private parties who are in possession of valuable material have to be persuaded to part with them for the benefit of the nation and of the world at large either in a spirit of service or for money. Failing this, it cannot be difficult to get those manuscripts copied out or microfilmed. Days are gone when people used to claim excess of secrecy to a particular Vidya and refused to share its knowledge with others. Because most of these secrets have remained as secrets for such a long time that even the present possessors of their written scripts do not know their use. It is not uncommon in Nepal to find persons claiming to possess some valuable Tantric manuscripts and refusing to make them available to others for love or for money, even though they may not themselves understand a word of it. There should be a remedy for this intransigence so that the material in possession of such persons is converted to a national property and somebody really qualified to use the secret content of it for the benefit of humanity is not denied access to it.

Acquisition and preservation of manuscripts become relevant only as a prelude to scientific research and exploration of the knowledge contained in them. With the initiative and drive that is expected in abundance from His Majesty's Government a systematic programme is bound to be

drawn for research, editing and publication of rare and valuable manuscripts. It is also fervently hoped that a band of enthusiastic scholars would come forward to participate in this Gnan Yajna. While talking of research and publication one should not overlook the importance of a synthesis to be effected between the traditional scholarship on the one hand and the products of the modern university on the other, with their upto-date methods of research. The tendency on the part of modern scholarship to frown at the old system as something out-of-date or reactionary is as harmful as the inferiority complex that is gaining roots in the minds of some of the traditionally trained scholars. They are the warp and woof of the entire texture and each is ineffective without the other. The depth of knowledge in the specialized fields of study of the traditional scholar is as much a factor to be respected by the modern university graduate as his own scientific and objective approach to problems is for the traditional pandit. In analysing and interpreting the past wisdom is the job of the elder generation of scholarship, the new generation is to study and re-interpret it to suit the modern age.

Under the constant and vigilant guidance of His Majesty whose very personality is a synthesis between the old and the new, Nepal will continue to be, as it was in the past, the repository of Hindu culture and oriental learning, and the day is not far off when the attention of oriental scholarship will be focussed on this window to an heritage which is symbolically opened by the opening of this National Archives.