

# Archives and Nepal

— R. J. Thapa

## A. Introductory

The word archive, now used generally in the plural, is derived from the Latin word *Archivium* or *Archium* and has come to connote at once public or government documents as well as the place where such records are kept. These records or their preservation are not an end in themselves, but they constitute the most informative and reliable source of information on all events of importance or significance in the life of a nation leading to the unfolding and proper assessment of its history, in all its myriad facets.

## B. The Rashtriya Abhilekhalaya, Nepal

Nepal has given a new orientation to the concept of archives. The conception of historical research in Nepal encompasses, apart from state records, archaeology, before the days of writing, inscriptions, and coins, recording events and royal names, respectively, upon a firmly established chronological background, besides manuscripts, in the different languages and scripts of the land, bearing upon astrology, tantras, dharma-sastras, Vedas, literature including drama and lexicography, philosophy and the Puranas, recording at once Nepal's attainments in these fields and grasp of general advance in the different branches of learning. All these different lines of work which contribute in their different ways to the filling

up of the lacunae in our knowledge of the past from the most ancient times upto the present day are co-ordinated under one common Directorate, namely, the Department of Archaeology. It controls and co-ordinates the activities of the pure archaeologist, whose field ranges from prehistory, through proto-history to early historical periods, the epigraphist, the numismatist, the scholar of ancient manuscripts and the archivist alike. This is as it should be in the initial stages of the development of our country. In course of time, when our material grows and our work intensifies, we may, with justification, bifurcate a little, with provision for an essential overriding liaison, for there is, after all, no conflict in our objectives. For the present, therefore, the Archives with its two collateral branches of manuscripts proper and documents of historical import, with epigraphy thrown in between the two, are grouped under the Department of Archaeology. It has three sections or divisions, called respectively, (i) the *Aitihāsika Abhilekha Sakha* (Historical Documents); (ii) *Sadharana-tatha-Arthika Prasasana Sakha* (Administration & Finance) and (iii) *Hasta-likhita Grantha Sakha* (Manuscripts).

The Historical Documents Section working under a *Abhilekha Visesajna* (Archivist) has six sections called, respectively, *Prakasana* (Publication), *Uddharana-tatha-Suchi-karana* (Indexing and Cataloguing) (

Adhikarana Vyavastha (Acquisition), Marmmat-tatha-Sambhara (Repairs and Preservation), Microfilming, and Lipi (Epigraphy). The Manuscripts Section working under an Acharya, currently assisted by a Curator, provided by the Indian Cooperation Mission, is divided into six sub-sections entitled: (i) Jyotisha (astrology); (ii) Tantras; (iii) Dharma-sastras and Vedas; (iv) Sahitya including Nataka and Kosha (Literature including Drama and Dictionary); (v) Darsana (Philosophy) and (vi) Puranas, respectively. The work in both these sections would consist of collection, classification, cataloguing, preservation, research and publication, respectively. While it is primarily intended that the bulk of the routine work would be done by departmental employees, it is recognized that the limited personnel of the Branch would not be in a position to do full justice to research for the simple fact of their extremely limited number. It may be stated here without reservation that all scholars, private or otherwise, would be given the fullest co-operation and facilities for consultation and working in the Abhilekhalaya on any subject of their choice, under the safeguards and conditions laid down by the Abhilekhalaya. At the same time it must be recognized that no such liberties may be taken with the documents as may endanger their very security.

In the scheme of things envisaged, the academic officials will be rendered free of administrative and financial responsibilities, which will be looked after by the Administration and Finance Section working under the overall control and supervision of the Chief Research Officer, so that their entire time may be devoted to the academic aspects of the work, which will naturally be intensified.

A considerable thought has been given to the technical aspects of the auxiliary work

connected with the academic work of the Branch. These consist of (i) chemical treatment of damaged or decaying materials, (ii) fumigation by insecticides; (iii) repairs by lamination; (iv) photographic and micro-film records, as well as (v) eye-copying of the documents in advanced stages of decay.

Though the materials of the manuscripts comprise palm leaf, birch bark, Nepalese paper, ordinary paper imported from Varanasi, canvas, cloth, as well as, in extreme cases, copper plates, besides paper estampages of inscriptions, and thus cover a much wider range than the historical documents, the methods of treatment and preservation are common to both. The same may be said about recording or copying of the documents. Both may often require the services of efficient linguists versed in different languages as well as scripts of the land in which the documents or manuscripts may be written, for a proper and correct interpretation. There is provision, therefore, for linguists with knowledge of epigraphy to work in the Branch.

The Department has already recruited an Archivist, trained in the National Archives of India, and he has been recently sent for further training in advanced techniques to Paris for the period of one year.

So far the work of the Branch in the main has been confined to the listing of the documents that may be available in the different offices of the Government and of collecting some Lal Mohars, Tamrapatras (copper plates) Chitthi-patras from the Jhapa and Ilam districts in the Mechi Anchal of Eastern Nepal. The lists of documents have so far been prepared for the Ministries of Law, Commerce and Industries and Defence, respectively, and the offices of the Election Commission, Tahabil Goswara, Health Department, Kitab Khana, Revenue Department (Record Office), and the Land Survey

Department, all in Kathmandu. It is hoped that the survey work would soon be completed. Nevertheless, different offices of the Government may be requested to keep our need in view and make over such documents for our examination and custody as those in which they may no longer be interested. The importance of this appeal, in the context of what has been stated above, cannot be over-emphasized.

Our main difficulty in the way of the intensification of the projected works has been the lack of a proper building for storage and the office. This difficulty has now been overcome, and we have now shifted our archives and our rich heritage of manuscripts and copies of inscriptions to the newly built Rashtriya Abhilekhalaya, a strikingly beautiful structure, located next to the Sarvochcha Adalat. It comes to us with honour and pride from the Indian Co-operation Mission, built by them at a cost of nearly seven lakhs of rupees. Apart from the traditional architectural style of the building, which imparts to it, befittingly, the appearance of a temple of learning, the building contains within it considerably adequate space for stacking, fumigation, lamination, research, conference, photography, resident scholars' room, canteen, library, besides the administrative offices and officers' rooms. Being centrally located it is easily accessible to all and sundry, including scholars.

It will not be out of place here to mention briefly a few words about our manuscripts. The nucleus of our manuscripts collection would be formed by the manuscripts in the Bir Pustakalaya, which number about 22,000. The library itself, which contains printed books as well, was formed in the days of Maharajdhiraja Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shah Deva. It was given a systematic form by Bir Shumsher J. B. Rana, and named as the Bir Pustakalaya.

The other group of manuscripts which would find its way into our common collection is now in the Rashtriya Pustakalaya, formed out of the private library of Rajaguru Hemraj Pande bought at a cost of three lakhs of rupees by His Majesty's Government in 1955 (2013). This collection consists of about 8043 manuscripts.

It may be remembered in this context that the vast populace of Nepal has still in its possession diverse manuscripts on a multiplicity of subjects, which it cherishes as private family heir-looms. In the larger national interests even these should ultimately find their way into the Rashtriya Abhilekhalaya, which it behoves us all to build up and strengthen with all our might and influence at our command.

One last word in justification of including epigraphical studies under the Rashtriya Abhilekhalaya. Our epigraphs are perhaps the most numerous of all our historical records. There is hardly a shrine or temple or even an image or sculpture without a dedicatory record of its installation, giving us at once the name of the donor and date and throwing much light on contemporary life besides. They occur in the form of engraved records on stone, copper or wood, and in the form of painted descriptions on our murals. The earliest of them is perhaps the stone pillar inscription of Asoka recording his visit to the birthplace of Buddha in the twentieth year of his reign. Apart from the record of an important historical fact it helps us beyond any scope of doubt in the identification of Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha.

It is to inscriptions that we owe the bulk of our reliable evidence, though often in conjunction or reconciliation with literary evidence, on our religious beliefs such as Saivism including its Tantric ramifications, Vaishnavism or Tantric Buddhism, on our

religious as well as secular edifices and architecture as represented by the stupas or temples, including the Swayambhunatha Stupa, the Pasupati temple and the elusive Kailskuta-bhavana etc., on all our sculptures in wood stone or metal, on the truth and ancestry of the construction of the Kashtamandapa, which has contributed its name to the capital city, or the eclecticism and religious tolerance, culminating into a synthesis, of the kings and subjects alike, or such isolated but important events as the sack of the capital and valley by Shamsuddin Ill'as in A. D. 1349, and speedy restoration of all that was laid low by the indomitable spirit of a tenacious folk. Instances can be cited by the hundred to prove the point.

The importance of epigraphical studies in the proper assessment of a nation's life can perhaps be equally illustrated with an example from the land of our southern neighbour. An inscription of the tenth century at a little village called Uttiramerur, near Kanchipuram in the Chingleput district of Madras describes not merely the preva-

lence of local self-government at that date, but the very details of the process of election by ballot.

The importance of the integrated study of epigraphs as essential documents of history cannot therefore be over-emphasized.

### C. Conclusion

It would be clear, therefore, to see that a proper extraction of the grains of history from the trappings of chaff would depend very greatly on a concerted study of inscriptions, literary records and historical documents together. In boldly attempting this integrated study under a unified discipline in the Rashtriya Abhilekhalaya under the directorial control of the Department of Archaeology in a spirit of mutual understanding and collaboration, Nepal has made a novel experiment and has indeed broken fresh grounds in the field of historical research. We can do no better than seek God's blessings in our long and arduous task ahead.