

Organised by  
SAMHITA: SOUTH ASIAN MANUSCRIPT HISTORIES AND TEXTUAL ARCHIVE

*An initiative of the India International Centre, New Delhi, supported by  
the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*



JAIN MANUSCRIPT COVER (PATLI)  
*Opaque watercolour on wood; Gujarat; early 12th century*  
*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CCo*  
5.5 x 32.4 cm



# Evam Vadati Pustakam

*“Manuscripts Tell their Stories”*

13-28 SEPTEMBER 2023 | IIC ART GALLERY, KAMALADEVI COMPLEX





TWO SCRIBES COPYING MANUSCRIPTS OR OFFICIAL LETTERS

*Part of series, Trades and Occupations in India, Part 2  
Gouache painting by an Indian artist, 1800– 899; 26.2 x 33.8 cm  
Wellcome Collection, Public Domain Mark 1.0*



## Evam Vadati Pustakam

*“Manuscripts Tell their  
Stories”*

“Protect me from oil, protect me from water, protect me from loose binding;  
Do not place me in the hands of heedless people”, so says the book

तैलाद् रक्ष जलाद् रक्ष रक्ष माम् शूलथबंधनात् ।  
मूर्खहस्ते न दातव्यम् एवं वदति पुस्तकम् ॥

tailād rakṣa jalād rakṣa, rakṣa mām ślathabandhanāt/ mūrkhahaste na dātavyam  
evam vadati pustakam!

(verse often found at the end of Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts)

Manuscripts are hand-written documents reflecting different learned traditions, written on palm leaf, birch bark, handmade paper and other materials. Manuscripts in South Asia cover rich and varied fields: faiths such as Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Islam; texts on disciplines like logic, grammar, mathematics, astronomy and astrology, medicine, chemistry and biology; works of poetry and drama, and treatises on architecture, performing arts and poetics. They range from aphoristic statements (sutras), compilations of observations (samhitas) and commentarial literature (vyakhyanas), to verse genres like vacana, chronicles, biography (tazkirah) and travelogues (safarnama). In India, they are found in different languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, Farsi and the rich regional languages of India. Through the centuries, these texts multiplied, resulting in a large textual corpus.

This exhibition, ‘Evam Vadati Pustakam’, is a selection of digitized South Asian manuscripts from national and international repositories, illustrating what manuscripts can tell us about their authors, the process of composition, and the worlds of their readers. It traces the stories of how manuscripts were collected down the ages and the journeys of texts across languages and to different parts of Asia and beyond.

This exhibition forms part of SAMHiTA: South Asian Manuscript Histories and Textual Archive. The word ‘samhita’ in Sanskrit means ‘compilation’ or ‘collection’. It is an initiative of the IIC supported by the Ministry of External Affairs to create a database on South Asian manuscripts housed in institutions outside India.

*Sudha Gopalakrishnan*  
Project Director, SAMHiTA



The India International Centre is privileged to host this exhibition on South Asian manuscripts, and how their journeys enable us trace over two millennia of movement of people, ideas and cultures across the Asian space. Located at the intersection of the ancient caravan routes and the shipping routes governed by the monsoon winds, South Asia has been a crucible for the melding of ideas from Central, East and West Asia. The exhibition brings to life stories of how texts travelled throughout the subcontinent and beyond, contributing to ideas and beliefs, medical practice and mathematical systems, imaginative literature and everyday entertainment, through translations into over a dozen languages of Asia. These manuscripts help us re-discover histories of interaction that have created the world as we know it today.

## Messages

*Shyam Saran*  
President, India International Centre



South Asia's manuscript heritage connects us with vital aspects of our inheritance. Manuscripts show us how texts connected different regions and how knowledge evolved through the linkage and synthesis of disciplines like language, philosophy and healing. This exhibition celebrates the diversity of South Asia's scripts and literary traditions, the artistry of scribes, painters and binders, patrons of authors and translators, and the dedication of scholars who carried manuscripts to different regions, and restores the legacies dispersed over time.

*K.M. Shrivastava*  
Director, India International Centre

# South Asia's Manuscript Heritage

## *An Introduction*

### **'BOWER MANUSCRIPT'** (NĀVANĪTAKA/SID- DHASAṆKARṢA)

*Sanskrit; Early Gupta/Late Brahmi script;  
Birch-bark  
Kucha; 5th-6th century CE  
Bodleian Library, Oxford University*

From ancient times, knowledge systems were passed down to succeeding generations through a rich oral tradition. With the gradual decline of oral transmission, these came to be written down on different materials such as stone, copper plate, birch bark, palm leaf, parchment and paper.

It appears that the art of writing was known to Indians for over two thousand years. The wisdom of ancient knowledge has come down to us in the form of manuscripts. In India and South Asia, they are composed in different languages, and are housed in libraries, mutts, monasteries, temples and in private collections spread all over the country. India has among the largest collections of manuscripts anywhere in the world.

From the early days of writing, manuscripts from India travelled to regions in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, leading to the circulation of ideas and beliefs relating to religion and philosophy, exchange of mathematical and medical concepts, and spread of narrative and hagiographic literature.



In 1888, a Turki tribesman discovered these fragments of birch-bark, 51 folios bound in the pothi format, in a Buddhist monastery near Kucha on the Silk Route, and sold them to Major-General Bower. Paleographer A.F. Rudolf Hoernle spent 21 years deciphering them, and published an edition in 1912. In 1925, Kaviraj Balawant Singh Mohan published a Sanskrit edition. The manuscript probably belonged to a monk named Yasomitra, and was scribed by four monks from Kashmir or Odeyana. It has seven parts, the first three on medicine, the fourth and fifth on divination, and the last two on protective charms. They attest that Ayurveda was a well-established tradition in Central Asia in the first centuries CE, and incorporated Vedic and Buddhist influences.

Over the centuries, different parts of the subcontinent had exchanges with regions of Asia for trade, pilgrimage and diplomacy. Texts travelled between India, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia, stimulating the creation of new forms and ideas in poetry, performing arts, architecture, the sciences, and influencing even countries without a direct contact with India, like present-day Russia and Japan. From around the 18th century, manuscripts were carried to the West by scholars and collectors, and are now found in major institutions and universities with a focus on South Asian Studies.

The thread of a common vocabulary is exemplified in the images below: two exquisitely illustrated 19th-century manuscripts from Kashmir and Burma representing 1000-year-old traditions—Yoga cakras in a Saiva framework, and Pali Buddhism—and both featuring the motif of the hamsa bird.

### PAINTED SCROLL WITH CHAKRAS

Kashmir, 18th Century

Opaque Watercolour, gold, silver and ink on paper

376.7 x 18 cm

Victoria & Albert Museum, London, IS 8-1987

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London





### KAMMAVACA WITH HAMSA IN MEDALLION ON BORDER

Pali; Burmese 'tamarind script'; Palm leaf;

54 x 9.8 cm

Burma; 18th-19th century

Wellcome Collection, London, and SAMHiTA



### ASHTASAHASRIKA PRAJNAPARAMITA SUTRA

An early Mahayana text, this has been described as one of the first works to register the power of texts to generate positive mental energies. It is written in the Bhujimol script used in Nepal. The scribe, however, claims to be from Nalanda, which is testimony to the prestige of the university.

Gandhari; Bhujimol script; Watercolour on palm-leaf

Nepal; 12th century CE

Sanskrit MS Epsilon 1, Wellcome Collection.  
CC BY 4.0.

## MATERIALS OF MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION

Scholars have shown how the history of manuscript production in South Asia is linked to the evolution of its scripts, the tools of writing, the layout of texts, and the development of manuscript painting, illumination and binding.

Manuscripts are found on many different surfaces, including stone, metal, cloth, ivory, birch bark, palm leaf and paper. In present-day India, the oldest extant manuscripts are of birch bark (bhurjapatra). The bark was prepared and cut into layers that were joined up to form a scroll, or cut into pothi format (horizontal rectangles), or into vertical codices. Many early Buddhist manuscripts are of birch bark.

From the middle of the first millennium, we see manuscripts of palm-leaf (talapatra, olai), which came to be the most widely used medium for writing. Leaves from the talipot tree were prepared and cut into pothi format. Pen (lekhani) and ink (masi) were used for writing. In the south, letters would be incised with an iron stylus, and the leaves smeared with ink, then cleaned with sand, leaving the ink in the incised letters. From the 14th century, talipot leaves came to be replaced by leaves of the palmyra which is easier to cultivate. However, palmyra leaves do not take ink easily, calling for the use of a stylus.

Assam has a long tradition of manuscripts on sanchipat, or the bark of the aloe tree (sanchi). Copper plate was used for inscriptions, such as royal edicts, as these were meant to last.

It was from the 13th century that paper came to be used widely. This led to the growth of manuscript painting; in the case of palm leaf, paint was liable to flake off with repeated turning of folios.

Mughal ateliers employed a team of craftsmen, including illuminators, calligraphers, binders, painters.



## KALPASUTRA

Sanskrit, Jaina-Nagari; watercolour on paper;

8.6 x 35.1 cm

Gujarat; late 14th century

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain.

## INDIGO-DYED PARCHMENT INSCRIBED WITH METALLIC INK

Fragment of Mahaparinirvana-sutra

China; 9-10th century CE

British Library. Public Domain Mark 1.0.





BOOKBINDING IN PAPIER-  
MÂCHÉ, PAINTED, GILDED AND  
LACQUERED

*Mughal; mid-16th century*  
*Metropolitan Museum of Art; Open Access*

# SCRIBES and SCRIPTS

## LALITAVISTARANAMA MAHAYANA SUTRA

Sanskrit; Prachalit Nepali  
Kathmandu Valley; 1683  
British Library (Endangered Archives  
Programme)  
Digitized by Shanker Thapa, and reproduced  
courtesy Jnana Ratna Shakya Collection,  
Lalitpur

There was a remarkable growth in inscriptions, and the writing of prescriptive and narrative literature from 200 BCE to 300 CE. Writing was used to codify religious traditions, to develop philosophical systems through commentarial exposition, for legal proclamations, and to spread popular narratives. The development of regional literary traditions resulted in a great diversity of scripts.

This diversity is captured in a story about the Bodhisattva in the Lalitavistaranama Mahayana Sutra (early first millennium), where he astounds his schoolteacher by referring to 64 scripts, starting with Brahmi and Kharoshthi.



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## SIDDHAM SCRIPT

Inscription of Ushnisha Vijaya Dharani Sutra  
7th century CE  
Wikimedia Commons  
Asakusa Temple, Tokyo, 7th century CE  
Photograph by Phokin, Wikimedia Commons,  
CC-BY-SA-4.0

## RANJANA SCRIPT (NEPAL)

Tara Shatanama Stotra

Sanskrit

Kathmandu Valley; 17th century

British Library (Endangered Archives  
Programme)

Digitized by Shanker Thapa, and reproduced  
courtesy Akshesvar Mahabihara, Lalitpur,  
CC-BY-NC





# PAKSHATAJAGADISHIPATRIKA

Sanskrit in Bangla script; with commentary  
in Telugu

18-19th Century, palm leaf; 11 x 38 cm

University of Pennsylvania Libraries

The scripts of eastern India have their roots in Gaudi (10th to 14th century). This manuscript is in the medieval Bengali script (15th to 19th century). Its author, Jagadisha 'Tarkalankara', was a philosopher from Navadvipa, which from the 15th to 17th century attracted scholars from Nepal and beyond, and produced a body of work on knowledge, the self and mathematics that circulated throughout India. This particular manuscript bears witness to this process, for it has Telugu annotations.

# How to Read a Manuscript

The layout of a manuscript followed certain conventions, showing us how to read them, and about contexts of their production. Particularly important are colophons, which give details such as the date, author, patron, scribe and provenance.

Traditionally, they would start with a ‘namaskara phrase’. In the manuscript of the Ashokavadana below, the benedictory phrase reads, ‘Om namah Sri Shakyasimhaya’, invoking the lion of the Shakyas, Lord Buddha

## ASHOKAVADANA

Sanskrit; Devanagari; Paper  
Kathmandu Valley; 1864  
British Library (Endangered Archives Programme)  
Digitized by Shanker Thapa, reproduced courtesy Akshesvar Mahabihara, Lalitpur



## MAHABHASHYA PRADIPA

(Adhyaya 6)  
Sanskrit; Devanagari; Paper  
Dharmartha Trust, Raghunatha Temple,  
Jammu & Kashmir, via Internet Archive,  
CCo 1.0 Universal



Scribes would conceal their errors by striking through the text or covering it with dark- coloured ink.

We can learn when a manuscript was written, by whom and at whose orders from the information that follows the colophon.

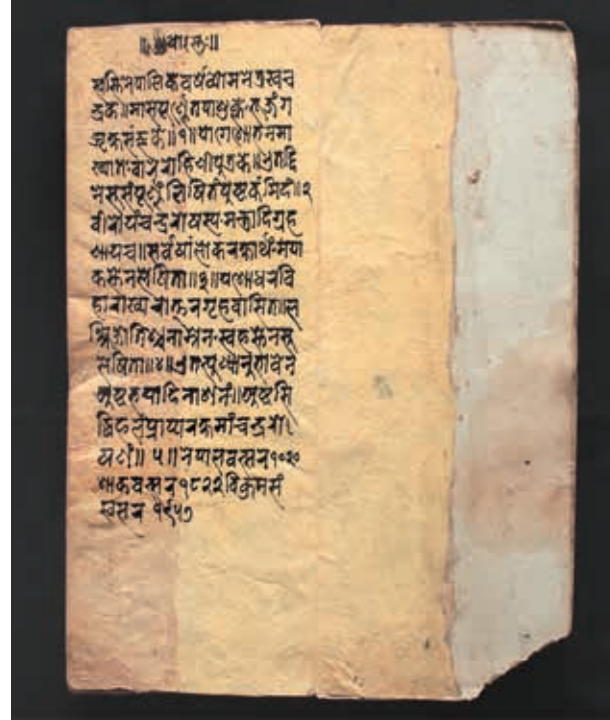
### ACHALABHISHEKA

Sanskrit; Newari script; Paper

Kathmandu Valley; 1899–1900

British Library (Endangered Archives Programme)

Digitized by Shanker Thapa, reproduced courtesy Akshesvar Mahabihara, Lalitpur



Here, the date of the manuscript is initially mentioned using a chronogram: vyoma (sky, representing the null value), netra (eyes, representing the value two), kha (space, representing the value null), chandrako (moon, representing the value one). Following the practice in Vedic mathematics, ‘aṅkasya vāmā gati’, these numbers are read from right to left, giving us the date 1020.

This is confirmed when the scribe gives the numeric date according to three calendars: 1020 Nepal Samvat, 1957 Vikram Samvat, and 1822 Saka Samvat; all of which refer to 1899–1900 CE.

The scribe gives the name of the author, Yogesh, and also his own name, Lakshmi Jothi, son of Rohini, residing north of Yashodhara Vihara in Nepal. He says he took great pains (kaṣṭa) in writing the manuscript.

**'A COURT ATELIER, FOLIO  
FROM A MANUSCRIPT OF THE  
ETHICS OF NASIR (AKHLAQ-I  
NASIRI)'**

Painting attributed to Sanju; opaque  
watercolour, ink and gold on paper; 23.9 cm ×  
14.2 cm

Lahore; ca. 1590–95

© The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, CC BY-  
NC 2.5 CA

This painting depicts the organization of a  
manuscript atelier. On the top right is seated  
the master craftsman instructing a younger  
painter; the men in front of them copy out text;  
on the bottom right a man prepares the surface  
of the paper by burnishing. It illustrates the  
argument of Iranian philosopher-scientist  
Nasir al-Din Tusi (1235) that just as a master  
craftsman guides those who may lack capacity  
for invention, society needs a hierarchical  
structure with a firm ruler at the head (Marika  
Sardar for the Aga Khan Museum).



## What do we find in Manuscripts?

### SUSHRUTA-SAMHITA

*Ink and opaque watercolour on palm leaf;*  
3.8 x 50.8 cm  
Nepal, 18th-19th Century  
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

South Asia's manuscript heritage represents a diverse literature difficult to capture in a summary, but some aspects are worth emphasizing. The literature crosses the boundaries of what we today see as separate disciplines, such as medicine, mathematics, linguistic science, and metaphysics. E.g., medical literature of the first millennium describes bodily humours, causes and treatment of illness, mental health, diet, but also methods of beautification. Texts testify to sustained dialogue across philosophical traditions and belief systems, and show how knowledge was systematized for practice and for pedagogy.

Manuscripts might be objects of veneration, or serve as guides to practice, including the meditative contemplation of deities. There are theoretical treatises and practical manuals on applied sciences like architecture and agriculture, and literature on aesthetic theory and the performing arts; biographies of rulers, saints and Sufis; histories of individuals and dynasties; an array of imaginative literature; texts on games, on love-making, and on culinary matters including alcohol. Below are examples from different genres.



A manual on surgical procedure as practised almost two millennia ago, which describes ophthalmic surgery, the removal of bladder stones, arrows and splinters, suturing and other procedures.



This text from Nepal is on the worship of the naga deity, the performance of maṇḍala worship, and the homa ritual. Hindu architectural treatises like the Shilpa Prakasha and Vastu Vidya prescribe the propitiation of the vastunaga ('serpent of the site') before constructing a building. In Vajrayana Buddhism, this ritual was adapted for the construction of a maṇḍala, the dwelling place of the deities represented in it.

## PATANJALI'S YOGASUTRAS WITH VYASA'S COMMENTARY

Sanskrit; Devanagari; paper

19th Century

Dharmartha Trust, Raghunatha Temple,  
Jammu & Kashmir, via Internet Archive,  
CCo 1.0 Universal



In the above folio, Patanjali's sutras (aphorisms) are highlighted, and their meanings are explained in Vyasa's accompanying bhashya (commentary). Sutras condense complex ideas whose meanings would be clarified orally by teachers, or elaborated through written commentary. The Sutras and Bhashya inspired dozens of commentaries from different philosophical traditions, an instance of the diversity of perspectives from which texts were interpreted..

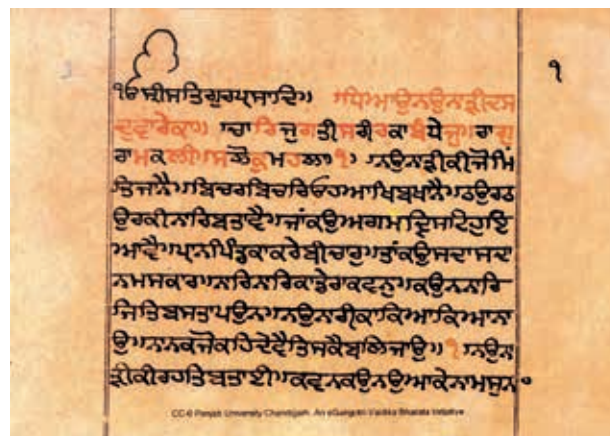
## PRANA SANGALI

(collection of verses on prana attributed to  
Guru Nanak)

Punjabi; Gurmukhi; paper

Date not known

Punjab University Chandigarh Manuscript  
Collection, e-Gangotri Vaidik Bharat initiative  
via Internet Archive,  
CCo 1.0 Universal



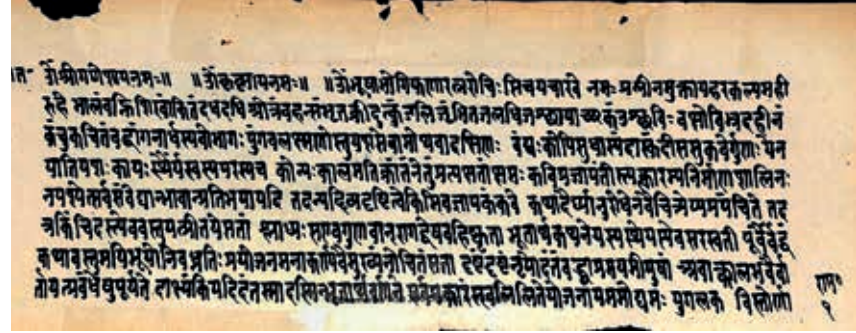
## RAJATARANGINI

Sanskrit; Devanagari; paper

19th century

Dharmartha Trust, Raghunatha Temple,  
Jammu & Kashmir, via Internet Archive,  
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Kalhana's history of Kashmir takes in 2000 years in 8000 verses. It combines an evocation of its sacred landscape with a critique of contemporary politics and society.



## RAZMNAMA ('BOOK OF WAR')

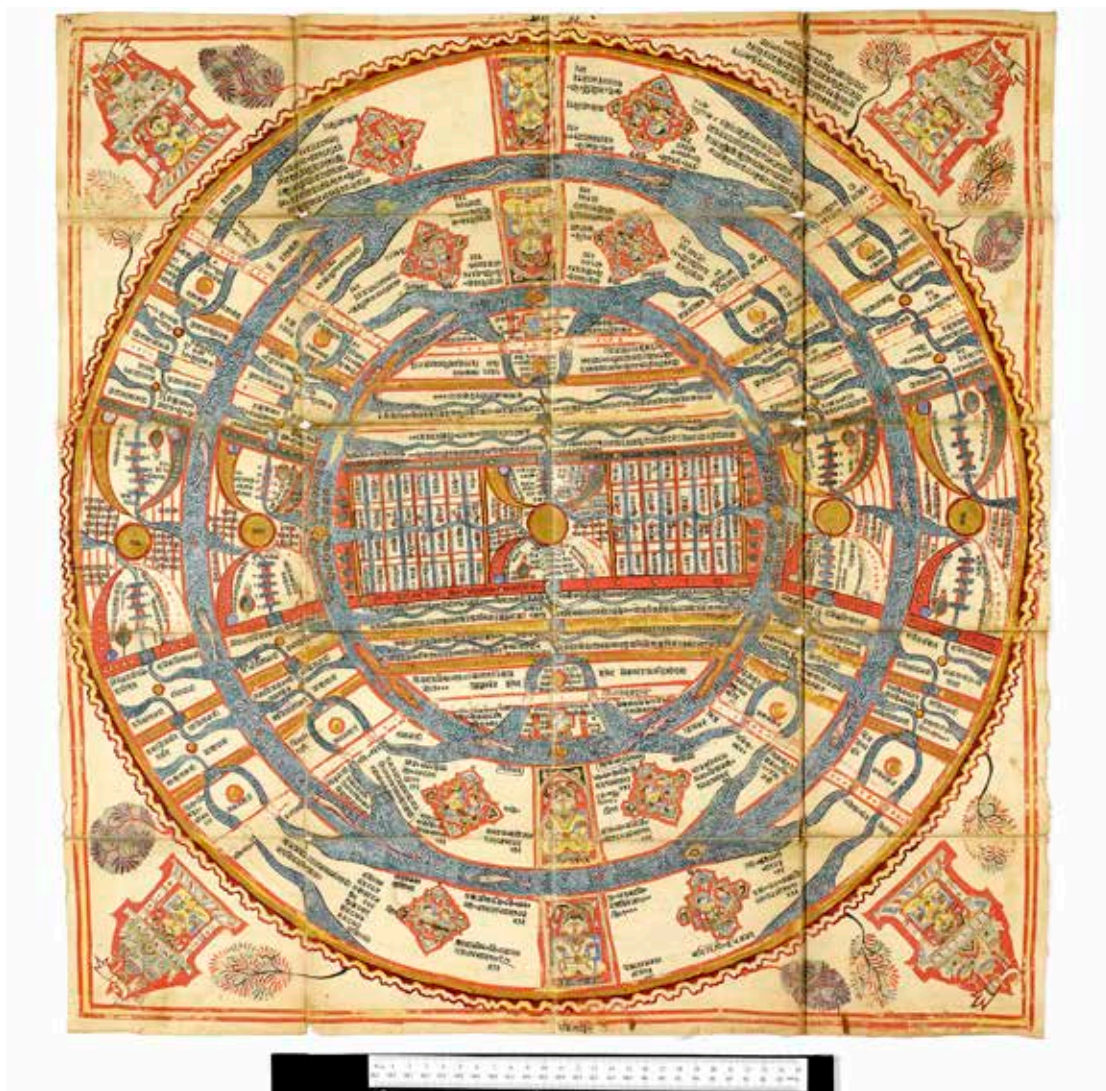
Farsi

University of Pennsylvania Libraries Public  
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In 1582, Akbar commissioned a team of Sanskrit and Farsi scholars led by Naqib Khan to translate the Mahabharata. It has been observed that the translation sought to preserve the cultural contexts of Sanskrit terms (like rishi) instead of replacing them with Farsi equivalents.

At the same time, translators sought to heighten the emotional and dramatic power of scenes by adding quotations from Nizami, Hafiz and other authors familiar to Farsi readers.



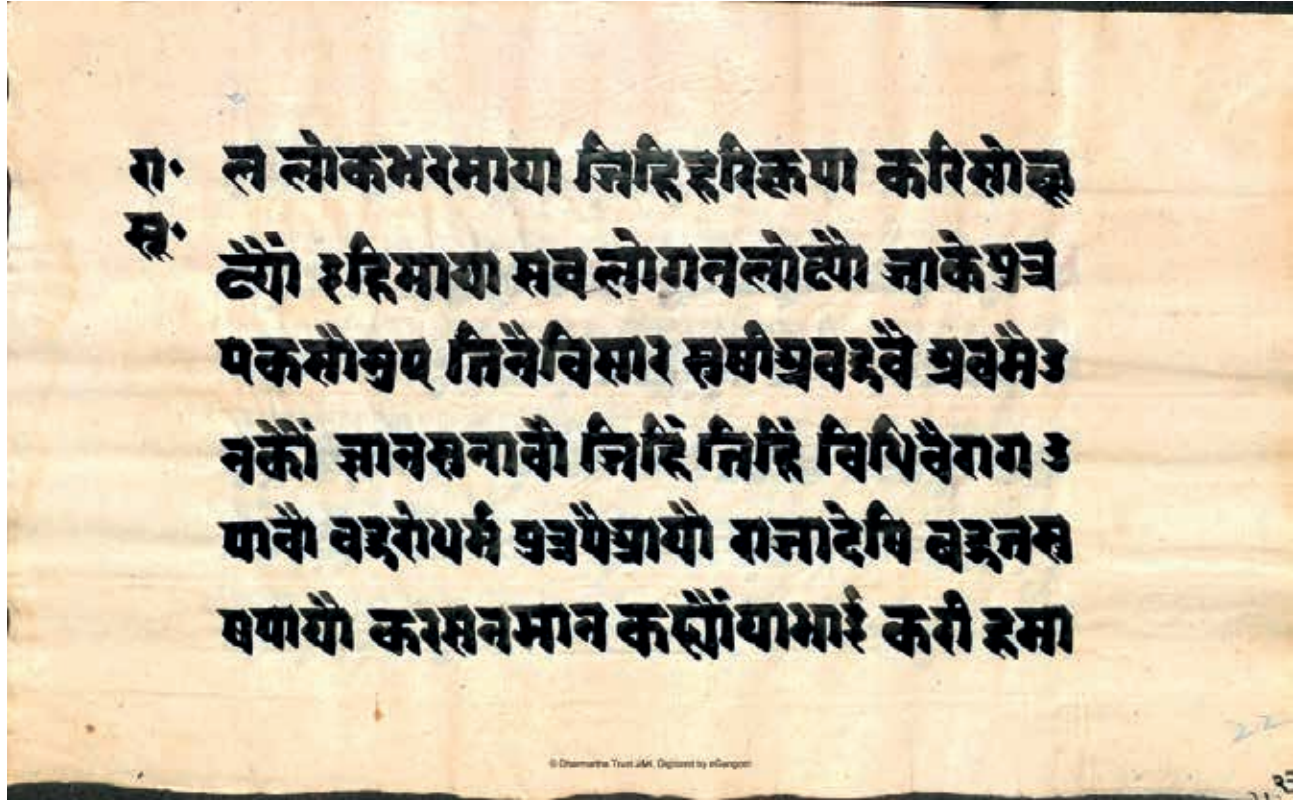


### JAIN MAP

Sanskrit; Jaina Nagari; paper; black ink on paper  
 Rajasthan; 17th-18th century  
 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Or. Evans-Wentz 1: CC-BY-NC 4.0.

A map of Jambudvīpa, which according to the Jain model of the universe forms part of manushya loka, inhabited by human beings and five-sensed animals. Jambudvīpa is divided into seven countries by six mountain ranges. The central band is Mahāvīra, where

tirthankaras take birth. To its south is Bharata (lower half of disc). We can see the Himavanta mountains in the north of Bharata, the rivers Ganga and Sindhu, and Ayodhya in the middle region.



TREATISE ON MALKAUS  
RAGAM/HINDOLAM

Sanskrit; Devanagari; Paper  
Dharmartha Trust, Raghunatha Temple,  
Jammu & Kashmir, via Internet Archive,  
CCo 1.0 Universal



PAINTING OF GAME BOARDS AND PUZZLES DESIGNED BY KRISHNARAJA WODEYAR III  
(1794-1868), MYSORE

*Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Jaganmohan Palace, Photograph courtesy Jacob Schmidt Madsen*

## Travelling Texts

Throughout the centuries, manuscripts took texts to new audiences. They were carried by people in quest of authentic scripture or excited by new science, by those who saw manuscripts as their passage to a new civilization, and those for whom it was a means to recover lost legacies. In this section we look at what manuscripts meant to some of those in Asia and Europe who undertook expeditions, supported translations, collected manuscripts, and built institutions.

Buddhist monks like Xuanzang, who came to India in the seventh century CE to study Sanskrit, and Atiśa Dipamkara, the abbot of Vikramsila who was invited to Tibet, took texts to China, Nepal and Tibet. During the Mughal period, scholars like Abdur Rahim sponsored the translation of texts into Farsi.

From the 18th century, Oriental Studies emerged as a field in Europe and North America. Scholars Georg Bühler (1837–1898) purchased manuscripts privately, and, importantly, chose to study the living transmission of texts with India's traditional scholars. Together with Indian scholars like R.G. Bhandarkar (1837–1925), he set up programmes for critical historical interpretation of texts. In 1868–1878, under a government-sponsored programme, Bühler sought out Brahmin pandits and private collectors and visited Jaina repositories in order to purchase manuscripts, the majority of which he gave to the India Office Library, London, while some were donated to other libraries in the UK, Germany and Switzerland.

Discoveries of manuscripts by U. Ve. Swaminatha Iyer (1855–1942) and Fa. Gu. Halakatti (1880–1964) brought to light whole bodies of literature—Sangam Tamil and Kannada vacanas—that are now central to Indian literary legacy. In the 20th century, the Maharajas of Travancore and Baroda and rulers of other states started to sponsor the survey, collection and publication of manuscripts from private libraries, setting up institutions that brought them to a wider audience.

**ATISHA DIPAMKARA (982–1054)**

*Distemper and gold on cloth; 49.5 x 35.4 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Tibet; 12th century CE*

*A monk of Vikramshila Monastery, who travelled to Sumatra to study, and was afterwards invited to Tibet to preach. He carried Mahayana and Buddhist manuscripts to Tibet and helped translate them into Tibetan*





**ABDUR RAHIM KHAN-I-KHANAN (1556–1627)**

*Portrait by Hashim; Farsi; Nastaliq; Opaque watercolor, ink and gold on paper; 15 x 8.3 cm  
Mughal School; ca. 1627 Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery  
<https://asia-archive.si.edu/object/F1939.50a/>*

*Author and bibliophile under whose patronage the Ramayana was translated into Farsi, and who supported many calligraphers, painters and bookbinders*



*G. Bühler*

**GEORG BÜHLER (1837–1898)**

*Scholar and leader of the first survey of Indic manuscripts in the 19th century*



**F.G HALAKATTI (1880–1964)**

*Collector of manuscripts of Kannada vachanas*



**CHANDRA SHUMSHER JUNG  
BAHADUR RANA (1863–1929)**

*Maharaja of Nepal, who donated 6,000  
Sanskrit manuscripts to Oxford University  
in 1909*

## CREDITS

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**SAMHiTA** ([www.samhita.iicdelhi.in](http://www.samhita.iicdelhi.in)) is an initiative to create a relational database and open-access digital library of Indian and broadly South Asian manuscripts housed in libraries, archives and other repositories outside India, through collaboration with institutional partners. The word 'samhita' in Sanskrit means 'collection' or 'compilation'. SAMHiTA's goal is to consolidate information dispersed across institutions on an online platform accessible to all. It is housed at the India International Centre, a space for the exchange of ideas from across the world.

**SAMHiTA's** goal is for libraries and universities to come together to:

- Comprehensively inventory South Asian manuscripts, so that copies are not lost through neglect;
- Digitise select manuscripts, based on criteria like antiquity and singularity;
- Make accessible searchable texts in different South Asian languages;
- Build a relational database to facilitate connections between texts, authors, and places; and
- Establish an integrated framework for critical editing, translation, research, and education

