

Information Management in Special Archives of Kolkata: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Archives are the important information centre along with libraries and museums in respect to preservation of historical documents. And similar to libraries archives also exist in different categories like academic, special, governmental, newspaper and private archives. This article is dealing with one of this category and that is Special Archives. The research area that has been chosen for the data collection is central part of Kolkata. These archives are being studied to know how they are organising the documents and preserving them for future posterity. Finally, the paper tries to highlight the problems these traditional archives are facing in this digital era, especially handling of documents for digitising the archival materials. The problems are mainly related to skills and financial support for digitising the archival documents.

Keywords : Special archives; Documentation; Preservation and conservation; Digitisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Special Archives are referred to those archives that are holding a special type of collection, like documents related to an eminent person, particular job files, music, film, etc. These archives are working in a restricted atmosphere and with special permission one can use the documents. Some of these special archives are having reading facility for research scholars through their archival library. But others are purely preserving the documents for administrative requirements. The documentation of materials in these archives are quite similar to the libraries that is selection, organisation, classification, cataloguing, shelving and preservation. Retrieval of information is different in all these archives as some documents are allowed for users or research scholars and others are restricted and not for outside use.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of literature on Archives shows the various approaches towards archives which have been made, along with the development of archives in various countries. On surveying the literature, the following information has been found:

Kumar¹ has provided authentic information on digital archiving to help the reader understand many aspects of the topic as they emerge in the global multilingual environment. Again Lidman² takes an international viewpoint on national libraries and both national and regional archives. Divided into four easy-to-follow parts, this authoritative handbook,

Archives: Principles and Practices³ from Millar addresses the contextual, strategic, operational, and practical issues associated with creating an archival program. Reid⁴ aims to explore the context in which local authority archives and records services are operating, in terms of national and local outcomes and targets. Kaur⁵ discusses about the archives contain millions of documents like manuscripts, rare books, paintings, photographs, and historical records. All these constitute human heritage. Paper manuscripts, with the passage of time, are getting fragile and brittle because of various reasons.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper is to bring forth the archival collections – their conditions; total number of collections; period of establishments; the process of documentation and digitisation these special archives are undertaking for dissemination of information; and the problems these archives are facing related to digitising these archival materials.

4. METHODOLOGY

The special archives visited at the central part of Kolkata were done by prior permission taken from the archival authority. All their documentation procedures and other lacunas the archives are facing were noted with the help of a structured questionnaire. All these observation were analysed with conclusion and suggestions.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The contents of these archives are both conventional and non-conventional documents. Table 1 depicting the

Table 1. Contents of archives of Kolkata

Names of archives	No of records (approx.)	Period of records	Collections type	Condition of records
Archive of Christian Burial Board	16,000	1897 -	Death certificates, application letters	Fragile
Archive of Indian Theatre	7,000	1981 -	Books, magazines, cassettes, records	Good
Archive of Netaji Bhawan	N.A.	1920 -	Books, bulletins, monographs, letters, journals, audio CDs, video documentaries, biographies, historical texts, research papers.	Fragile
Archive of North Indian Classical Music	70000	N.A.	Scripts, Posters, music notations	Fragile
Archive of Rotary Club of Calcutta	2,400	1919 -	Trophies, pictures, banners, magazines	Good
Asiatic Society Archive	66,000	1766 -	Manuscripts, lithoplates, books, maps, letters	Fragile
Gandhi Memorial Sangrahalay	700	N.A.	Photographs, Negatives, Letters, Correspondences, Notes, etc	Fragile
Hitesranjan Sanyal Memorial Archive	19,000	19 th century onwards	Microforms, Paintings, Prints and Commercial Arts, private papers and collection	Both Fragile and Good
Maritime Archive, Kolkata Port Trust	N.A.	1870 -	Photographs, Published articles, Historical documents, paintings.	Fragile
National Institute of Film and Fine Arts, Kolkata	N.A.	1990 -	Film Video CDs, Cassettes	Good
P C Mahalanobis Memorial Museum & Archive	N.A.	N.A.	Personal works and letters of P C Mahalanobis	Fragile
State Bank Archives	N.A.	1805 - 1955	Books, folios, account books, bank notes, registers	Good

Note; N.A. : Exact number of records not known

types of collections these archives are holding. It could be understandable that these archives are called special archives because they are dealing with either a special category of subject or on eminent person. The majority of collections are paper documents but some are non conventional too. Like, Archives of Indian Theatre, Archives of Rotary Club, Archives of National Institute of Film and Fine Arts, they are holdings cassettes, CDs, gramophone discs too. The total number of collections are quite variable in these different categories of archives. Except Netaji Research Bureau, all archives have provided their approximate number of collection. Table 1 helps us to see at a glance that the special archives of Kolkata mostly came into being in the time period of 18th and 19th century, e.g. Asiatic Society (1784), Christian Burial Board (1840), etc. Whereas there are new born archives present like, National Institute of Film and Fine Arts (1990), etc. The oldest and unique among the group is State Bank Archives. State Bank was the India's first bank and it was established in British Kolkata in the name of Imperial Bank. Dwarakanath Tagore was its first account holder whose pass book was on display in the gallery of the archive. And as a result the documents are mostly fragile in condition.

On studying these archives it was found that similar to libraries, these archives have a basic documentation procedure, that is accession, classification, cataloguing, shelving (labelling and display), and preservation. There are no such designated printed accession register for the Archives, but more or less all are covering the following points for archival documents:

- Accession control number
- Creator or originator of collection
- Date of acquisition
- Dates covered
- Quantity of material
- Source name of collection or record
- Restrictions and terms of use
- Scope and content
- Storage location(s) with exact quantity of containers
- Type of acquisition (transfer, purchase, gift)
- Type of media (prints, negatives, slides, etc.)
- Condition information
- Notes

The special archives are classifying their documents as per subject headings whereas others like Maritime Archive use chronological order for file heading. Apart from these, all

archives are labelling and display their collections like State Bank Archive but very few have the effort to make provision for public exhibition which is very essential for the user to see the archival collection. Documentation process could be summed up as follows:

- At first the collected documents are accessioned through register entry
- Then they are classified either as per Classification scheme, or through subject division. In Special Archives like Christian Burial Board, they divide the papers as per land potta numbers, like Pottah No.102, 5th March 2010
- Cataloguing are also been done by the Archives using catalogue card for their archival content. The Asiatic Society Archives, maintains catalogue card in the following format:

AR	E Roer
L2043	Letters to Asiatic Society, 1843
- Labelling are made using file name or subject heading on each material. But many archives are nowadays making public display like Netaji Bhaban, Rotary Club etc. about their collections and disseminate the institutional history to the outside people.

After documentation, the most important area of work in these archives is preservation area. How to keep these rare documents safe and usable is always an important agenda for all types of archives whether big or small. It has been found on thorough visit if these special archives that most of them are using naphthalene as preservative. Dusting is done regularly in all these archives. All the archive are having their own preservation techniques. Special measures like fumigation, lamination are doing by large archives, like State Bank Archives, Asiatic Society, PC Mahalanobis Memorial Museum and Archives, etc. The reason is Fumigation and Lamination are costly measures, which need a separate fund other than regular preservation activities. The financial lacunas are one of the major obstacles in maintaining or preserving the rare documents the small archives are holding.

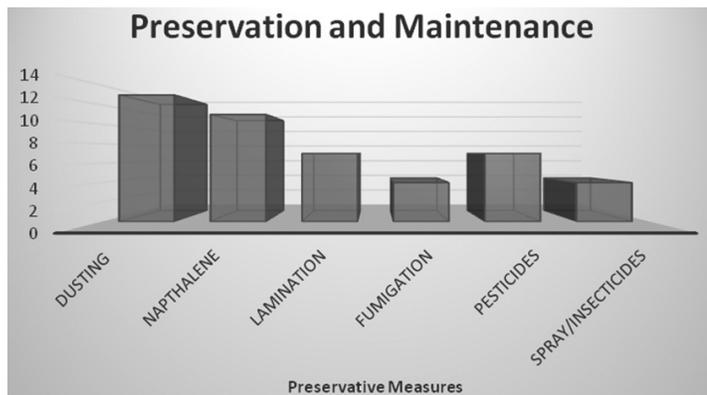


Figure 1. Distribution of different preservative measures in special archives.

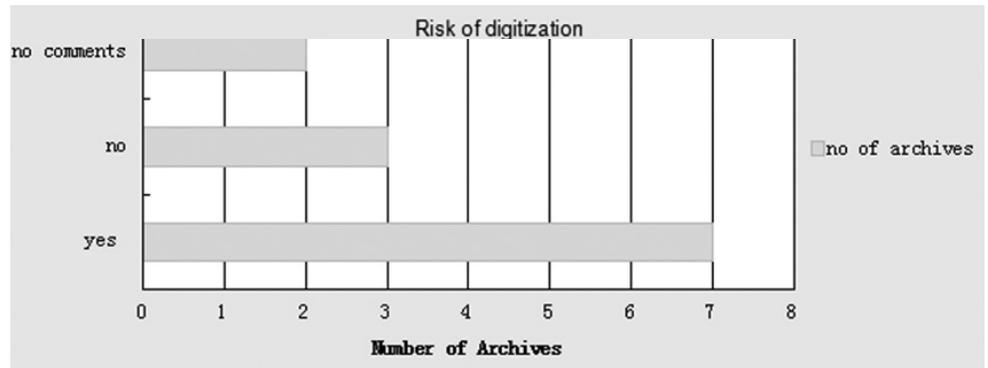


Figure 2. Distribution of archives supporting risk of digitisation of archival materials.

All the Special Archives that are studied in this work are digitising their resources using different methods, like, scanning, photocopying, microfilming, etc. The archival personnel who are being questioned in this study are more or less accepted that while converting the traditional documents into digital format needs a lot of skills. Unless they are trained in doing the conversion methods, there are lot of chances in loss of records. The archives like Gandhi Memorial Sangrahalay, Hitesh Ranjan Memorial Archives, etc. have lost few documents while the papers were placed in scanner machine due to high exposure of light and heat. Christian Burial Board Archival staff also reported that they suffered from duplication of their documents as they outsourced the people for digitising the documents.

Hence, digitisation is a definite need for the archives in respect to dissemination of information to the users, but at the same time, the risk factors are always there, that is, loss of content due to damage of material in scanning and theft of content due to outsourcing of people as archival people are lack in requisite skills.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Along with libraries and museums, archives are also one of the important information centre which needs proper management of information and its material for posterity. The traditional archives are transforming themselves into digital archives, with the help of modern technologies for the better preservation and dissemination of archival information. In the present technological world, the contemporary archivists are facing the most prevalent issues regarding digitisation of archival materials. The most important challenge is the conversion of material to digital format, taking into consideration the condition of records, contents of records and the users of records.

After analysing the tabular data of these archives, it can be said that the archives are very old except few like National Institute of Film and studies, and consequently their collected materials are very rare, old and physical conditions are brittle and fragile. The preservation aspect which is very important has been depicted in tables, where all the archives are taking at least the minimum measure, like, regular dusting, using naphthalene and pesticides. But it has been found that some archives are unable to proceed for excellent approach towards digitisation and preservation and that is due to dearth

of fund. The large archives like Asiatic Society, State Bank archives, etc. are taking special measures in preservation, like fumigation and lamination. But, other archives are though digitising themselves, but there are risk factors in respect to damage of documents, due to scanning and improper handling of materials. So an overview of this study shows that the special archives of Kolkata are very unique and special in their collections representing the historical background of Kolkata and India too. Proper exposure to Archives will help the people to know about the concept of Archives and its records. The archives can undertake the following activities like, exhibitions, advertisements, news, organising seminars and conferences, open public discussions, etc. for archival awareness.

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