

RECORDS AND ARCHIVES: A BRIEF NOTE

*Bidisha Chakraborty*¹

“Good public men are aware of the significance of public records....Each one knows that the present is the inheritor of the rich accumulations of the past.....Today’s generation is enriched, strengthened, and guided by what it knows of countless generations before it, or impoverished by what has been for ever lost because it had been improperly preserved.” [Senator Homer Ferguson of Republic party of USA]

This interesting quotation may be cited for the readers of this topic because of its relevance.

Records and Archives are two words closely related to cultural heritage. The documental heritage, a part of cultural heritage, is preserved through records and archives. Huge number of documents is created everyday but all are not important enough to be kept for the posterity. Documents which are considered important are set aside for the posterity and they acquire the character of records. **Thus all records are documents but all documents are not records.** For instance, while the monthly grocery shopping list is a record, a mere saree bill is not, since perusal of few of the former will help us to understand the socio-economic stature of a family.

The word ‘Record’ comes to be used in the English Language during the Middle Ages which derives its origin from the Latin word ‘recordari’. This word combines two words, one is ‘re’ which means ‘again’ and another is ‘cor’ or ‘cordis’ which means heart or mind. So recordari means ‘to remember or bring back to mind or heart permanently by learning again and again’. Before the invention of writing, the human mind used to record every transaction through ‘sruti’ and ‘smriti’. With the invention of writing, the character of records took a sharp turn.

The Dictionary meaning of records says that a record is something committed to writing in order to preserve the memory of a fact or event. If we delve deeper then we will see that records can take almost any physical form – books, manuscripts, papers, maps, photographs or other documentary materials. All records are documents, but all documents are not records. To be treated as a record a document must have a few characteristics.

1. Records presuppose a record creator – individual, organization, family, government.
2. Records need specific purpose of creation – legal, administrative or even personal (however such personal records with time becomes a piece of history).
3. Documents preserved by creating agency (or its legitimate successor, for e.g. archives is the legitimate successor of the government as the custodian of its records).

1 . Archivist, West Bengal State Archives.

4. Moreover it is the fundamental criteria of a record that it, after its creation, rests in its place of origin unless or until it is sent to an institution for permanent preservation or destroyed for ever as useless by the creator.

LIFE CYCLE OF A RECORD

Official records, whether government or non-government, are usually kept in file forms, i.e. the papers are kept in a folder. Nowadays e-filing system has been adopted, however the process remains the same. In any office, government or non-government, creation of record starts with the opening of a file and the purpose of Records or Files Management is to manage the creation of records in a controlled way so as to provide proper care to those groups of records which will be kept for more than ten years or permanently to be classed as archival documents. Thus we may say that records can be of either temporary or permanent nature. Temporary records are supposed to be destroyed from time to time (1 year, 3 years, 5 years, 12 years) depending on the importance of the records. Files or Records which are ultimately classed as 'Archives' or archival documents have to pass through three stages:

- (i) Current or active stage - when their actions are not over and they are frequently required for daily transactions i.e. from creation of a file to its closure and recording; they are kept by the creating agency.
- (ii) Semi-current or dormant stage- in which they are not frequently required to fulfil the purpose for which they were actually created. But they may be needed as references to perform other transactions i.e. from recording to its disposition; they are shifted to departmental record-rooms attached to the creating agency (so that it can be used, if necessary).
- (iii) Non-current or non-active stage when recorded files of 25 years of age are appraised by their creating agencies, in consultation with the Archives, to be marked as permanent from administrative, legal or historical point of view and are transferred to the Archival Institution for permanent preservation. Otherwise they are disposed off as useless.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT: OBJECTIVES AND BENEFITS

Records Management is the management of the life cycle of records/ files, which can be obtained through

- a) Controlled creation of records i.e. unnecessary creation of records should be avoided;
- b) Efficient management of those records i.e. timely review of semi-current records to see whether they should be kept for a period not exceeding 10 years;
- c) Timely disposition of records i.e. either transferring the records of permanent nature from the Record Room of the Creating Agency to an Archival Institution or weeding out records which are no longer needed.

Recording, reviewing and retention of a file are done with the help of a Record Retention Schedule which is a list or a table of all identified and labeled subjects of files dealt in an organization with the allocation of retention period against each subject. It is also the Disposal Schedule of Records. Consequently two sets of record emerge—Keep(K) and Destroy(D). Hence only K records are transferred to the archival institutions.

K records have 2 grades:

A Category Records : Pertain to subjects of prime administrative and historical importance such as policy decision, constitutional changes etc.

A category should be digitized.

B category records are more or less as important as A. Some records with time assume importance either due to historical or administrative value and then they are upgraded to A category. B category records are unique in the sense that they have no copies and exist only in abstract form in proceeding volumes.

Another thing to remember is this 25 years time limit as a transition phase is not very rigid nowadays. It may vary from country to country. As for instance in USA records are opened for the scholars after ten years.

Benefits of managing records are economy of space, manpower and cost of maintenance, easy retrieval of the required file or record which saves time, efficient administration through which quick decisions can be taken and enhanced credibility which in turn satisfies clientele.

The aforementioned stages combine to ensure proper Records Management through which records marked as 'Permanent Records' are transferred by the Record Officer to an Archives or Archival Institution. Before sending the records to the archives, it is the assigned duty of the Record officer to see that the files are tied in sizable bundles, preferably between two pieces of teak wood boards to avoid any damage. After that, the nomenclature i.e. the name of the department, the branch, year and the numbers of files are to be written on the board of the bundles.

The head of the Archives being the custodian, shall accept for deposit and preservation, those records with a complete Transfer List. Thus the journey of a file or record ends when it is transferred to an archival institution. The role of Transfer List is vital since it is the bridge between records and Archives.

ARCHIVES AND ANCIENT RECORD-KEEPING SYSTEM

The word Archives is derived from the Greek archeion meaning that which belongs to an office. The word has an interesting evolution. From the Greek was derived Latin archivium – French l'archives (feminine, singular) – les archives (collective form) – English archives in collective sense. In English the word Archives means – the building where the records are kept; the records themselves; the administrative set up for maintenance and servicing.

As mentioned earlier, only non-current records are shifted to the archives for future preservation. Records acquiring both administrative and historical values with the passing of time are shifted to Archives. So, **all archives are records but all records are not Archives.**

The Athenians kept their valuable documents in the temple of the mother of gods, the Metroon, next to the court house, in the public square in Athens. The temple contained treaties, laws, minutes of the popular assembly, and other state documents. Among the documents were the statement Socrates wrote in his own defence, the lists of the victors in the Olympic Games, the manuscripts of model plays by Sophocles and Euripides etc.

In the Middle ages Churches kept the record of birth and death of people of the concerned county.

However, all these record keeping systems were isolated since no organised state level network of record keeping evolved at that time. Records were kept primarily with a motive of keeping documental evidence of the existing civic system, religion, or custom. In India, Mughals were also very efficient in record keeping.

Archives and the French Revolution.

But it was only in France after 1789 that the first National Archives was established

In the initial fervour of the revolution in 1789, the National Assembly established an Archival Institution. A year later, by the decree of September 12, 1790, this archival institution was made the Archives Nationales of Paris. It was the first National Archives established by any country. In it were to be kept the records of the New France-records that signified its gains and displayed its glories.

This initiation of Archives at State level resulted in three important accomplishments in the archival field. ----(1) an independent national administration was established, (2) the principle of public access to archives was proclaimed (3) the responsibility of the State to care for the valuable documents of the past was recognised.

Gradually, the importance of preservation of old records drove different countries to follow the example of France and Archives came to established in countries like United Kingdom and United states of America in the subsequent years.

National Archives of India

It is interesting to note that prior to United States of America Indian National Archives was founded.

The genesis of the National Archives of India may be traced back to the year 1860 when Sandeman, the Civil Auditor, in his report stressed the need of relieving the offices of congestion

by destruction of the papers of routine nature and transfer of all valuable records to a 'Grand Central Archive'. Another point we may take into account is that, after the power was transferred from the Company to the Crown, systematic record keeping got priority of the administrator. 1857 was a major blow to the imperialists. Now they wanted to create a more mature and sophisticated administrative machinery in India. However it was only in 1889 when Professor G.W. Forrest of Elphinstone College, Bombay was entrusted the job to examine the records of the Foreign Department of the Government of India. Earlier he had earned reputation as an Archivist for his work in the Bombay Records Office. In his report, he made a strong plea for transferring all records of the administration of East India Company to a Central Repository. As a result, Imperial Records Department (IRD) came into existence on 11 March 1891 which was located in Imperial Secretariat Building at Calcutta (Kolkata). Professor G.W. Forrest was made its Officer in Charge. His main task was to examine, transfer, arrange and catalogue records of all the Departments and to organise a Central Library in place of various Departmental Libraries. After G.W. Forrest, the work at Imperial Records Department (IRD) progressed well under S.C. Hill (1900), C.R. Wilson (1902),

Utility of Archival Establishments:

The most impelling reason is the practical need of improving Government efficiency..

The old records reflect the origin and growth of a government and are the main source of information on all its activities. The information contained in the record is primarily required by the administration to take appropriate decision. For example, few years ago a controversy cropped up concerning the Calcutta Maidan. Calcutta Book fair was shifted away from the venue as a result of the controversy. The military authority, controlling the space, refused permission to the state government to hold the Fair there. In order to solve the problem Government sought relevant records of colonial period preserved in the Archive. It is interesting to note one of the records sought by the government mentioned that though control lay with the Military, the Lt. Governor was desirous to maintain maidan as recreational space for the city dwellers.

Similarly, now we are watching a nationwide uproar against land acquisition for industry, road and bridge constructions. If we go through the judicial records of our archive we will be astonished to realise that the present Calcutta city's existence is the outcome of series of land acquisitions. Raja RadhaKanta Deb had to bargain with Government to get compensation for his land situated in Strand Road which the Government desperately needed for creating the commercial hub of the City.

The second reason is acultural one. Public archives are one among many types of cultural resources which include books, manuscripts and museum . In our archives we have some valuable records which are the important milestones of modern India. For example Establishment of Calcutta Medical College, National Library, Calcutta University, First Census, female education widow remarriage, sanitary system, road construction, supply of drinking water, foundation of Calcutta Corporation, etc.They are worth preserving like the parks or monuments or buildings. The care of valuable public records therefore is a public obligation.

The third reason is a personal one related to citizenship. Records are the ultimate proof for all permanent civic rights and privileges and the immediate proof for all temporary property and financial rights. For instance, the Electoral Rolls are preserved in Archives and the essential proof of a person's citizenship.

ARCHIVES MANAGEMENT

Like Records Management, Archives Management is imperative for catering to the needs of the research scholars as well as the administrator and also for the in-house staff. Archives' Physical Management is done in the following manner:

- 1) After receiving the files or records in the bundles, the files are sent for air cleaning followed by fumigation process.
- 2) The physical checking and verification are done in accordance with the transfer list after fumigation.
- 3) During verification, if any damage is detected, that can be treated as per archival conservation and preservation rule.
- 4) Being the custodian, the archives cannot make any change in the arrangement of the bundle. Whatever discrepancies are found in the time of checking records, those should be written in the remarks column of the register. Extra accessed files are to be noted.
- 5) Files then are again tied in bundles and nomenclature with changes if any is to be written on them.
- 6) These bundles are then accessed in an Accession Register which has column like Accession serial number, name of the department from where the records are being received, date of receiving, file number in which the case is dealt, name of the repository where the records are sent bulk of the records and signature of the officer.
- 7) Bundles are then arranged in shelves of the stacks branch wise and according to chronological order..
- 8) Reference Media or Finding Aids like Guide Book, Hand Book, Indices, and Subject List etc. are then prepared for ready availability of records and to make them accessible for use by the external users and also by the archivists themselves.

A brief description of Reference Media

Without a Reference Media a person is lost in the sea of records. So, preparation of Reference Media must be done meticulously.

Transfer List: The very name suggests that the list is prepared when records are transferred from the creating agency to the archives. The subject matter is not important for this list. But the names of department, branch, year and month should be mentioned.

Check List: The importance of the Check List lies in the fact that this list comes handy in any type of work – transferring, sorting, stock-taking etc. Names of department, branch, year and month should be mentioned.

Descriptive List: This kind of list has become obsolete in the present days. The list comprises detailed account of the record including description of enclosure (if any). I personally feel that descriptive list proves cumbersome for researchers.

Index: This is the most popular form of reference media used in Archives. There are monthly, yearly and consolidated indices. Till 1858, when usually weekly recording was done, along with the subject matter, proceeding number, date, month and year of the record, the letter number and date of issue were also mentioned. Since April 1859, recording being done monthly, neither date of recording, nor letter number and date figured in the index.

Subject List: It is usually relevant for the 20th century records when filing system was introduced by Lord Linlithgow. Similar to Index, subject matter, month and year are the important ingredients of the list and in addition there is a Remarks column where the condition of the files, number of pages, enclosures etc. are mentioned.

The Reference Media discussed above are relevant for government record series. For private record series, the preparation of reference media may be made flexible according to need.

In principle, being the mere custodian, the staff of the archival organization is responsible

- 1) to prohibit any intermixing of records of one creator with another
- 2) to maintain the sanctity of records by disallowing any tampering so that it could be produced in the Court of Law
- 3) to protect every archival document because of its uniqueness. If it is lost, it is lost forever and cannot be replaced
- 4) to maintain the organic character so that the process of natural growth of the file ‘from the cradle to its grave’ is reflected.

Unlike in a library, where the books are arranged theme-wise, the records are arranged chronologically and organisationally. Thus we can say the two most vital points to be kept in mind while arranging the records in Archives are department and chronology.

MODERN PRESERVATION PROCESS UNDERTAKEN BY WEST BENGAL STATE ARCHIVES.

Conservation and preservation of archival heritage is one of the foremost tasks of an Archivist. While repairing old documents is essential to preserve them as a part of our cultural heritage, making duplicate copy of the valuable documents is equally important.

1. WBSA has undertaken the programme of digitization of its precious items and all the B files under archival custody have already been digitized and post-scanning work in in progress. The records of the Company period are also being digitized

2. Publication wing is an essential wing of Archives. It is the job of the archival personnel to undertake publication of the documents in thematic form, and thus we have publications on urbanization of Calcutta (1765- 1900) in two volumes. While the first volume (1765-1800) carries only the list of records pertaining to Calcutta the second volume is more extensive and covers the period from 1800-1900 not only through list, but also printing of records. Another important publication is on the Revolt of 1857 that reveals how Calcutta, modern West Bengal, North East Indian states and present Bangladesh were affected by the upheaval. These are only two of the our publications, the list is much longer and I believe these publications have been a great source of help to researchers, both amateur and professional. This is also a way of preserving our valuable past.

3. Maps are a very important and interesting source of history, particularly for history of urbanization. The Cartography section of WBSA houses invaluable maps that cover the Bengal Presidency and beyond. An important publication of WBSA is the publication of 37 maps on a portion of the north-division of Calcutta between 1887-1893.

In conclusion we may say that though it is thought that the concept of Archives is a modern concept generated with the upsurge of the French Revolution and travelled to India with the English East India Company, the tradition of record keeping in India existed from time immemorial. Archives being a part of our cultural heritage, its management and maintenance are a vital duty of the respective state and central governments.