
*Book Review***Evolution of State Archives, 1910-2010**

By Simonti Sen (Editor-In-Chief), Publisher-Directorate of State Archives, Department of Higher Education, Government of West Bengal. 2014, 182 pp. (Hardbound), Rs. 400/-, ISBN-978-93-83304-09-7

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“Archives record decisions, actions and memories. Archives are a unique and irreplaceable heritage passed from one generation to another. Archives are managed from creation to preserve their value and meaning. They are authoritative sources of information underpinning accountable and transparent administrative actions. They play an essential role in the development of societies by safeguarding and contributing to individual and community memory. Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life.”¹

In India, there are numerous state archives, each state having its own archive repository. According to the list of archives, there are at least 29 state archives in India. The West Bengal State Archives (WBSA) proudly celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2010, making a milestone in the preservation of the State's rich history. To commemorate this occasion, a special volume entitled “Evolution of State Archives: 1910-2010” was published, showcasing the archives' remarkable journey and contributions to the field of historical research.

This commemorative volume is divided into three insightful chapters, followed by comprehensive appendices that provides additional information and documentation. The first chapter ‘Record keeping through the Ages’ takes the reader on a journey through the evolution of record keeping in India, spanning from ancient times to the medieval period. This chapter is a masterfully explores various forms, practices, and traditions that have shaped India's history. The chapter begins with the earliest forms of record keeping including cave paintings with special mention of Bhimbetka, the emergence of written thought during the Indus Valley Civilization period, the record keeping practices of the Lichhavis and other Sanghas. It explains how the Arthashastra emphasises on record keeping as a key aspect of governance. The Asokan pillars, rock and cave inscriptions and the accounts of Chinese travellers, such as Faxian and Xuanzang, provided valuable insights into the record-keeping practices during this period. One of the strengths of this chapter is its ability to balance breadth and depth. The author provides a comprehensive overview of record-keeping practices of the Chola dynasty, the Sultanate period and especially

the Mughal period. Each section is meticulously researched, offering valuable insights into the development of record-keeping in India. Overall, this chapter is tour-de-force exploring the record keeping legacy of India.

The second chapter 'Creation and Organization of Records: Establishment of Imperial Record Department', meticulously chronicles the gradual efforts of the British rulers towards developing an archival repository in India, specifically in Bengal from the post-Plassey period. The author masterfully sketches the origin, growth and development of archives related to British paramountcy in Bengal. The chapter begins by highlighting the principal records of the British East India Company, which were primarily judicial and revenue related. The 1773 Regulating Act marked a significant milestone, separating revenue and judicial records. Cornwallis's emphasis on preservation led to the appointment of native record keepers and the implementation of innovative preservation methods, such as using oil to protect paper and constructing brick buildings to safeguard records. The chapter also touches on the importance of weeding out policies, which aimed to destroy useless records. A notable highlight of the chapter is the discussion of Roche's minute, which proposed a centralized record repository and classification of documents. This vision was eventually realized in 1891 with the establishment of the Imperial Record Office in Calcutta, under G.W. Forrest, which marked a significant milestone in the development of modern archives. The new Imperial Secretariat building near Government House in Calcutta housed the records of the Home Department and pre-mutiny records. The inclusion of scanned pictures of different official documents in this chapter, such as, Appointment of keepers of Records [Judicial (Civil), 1795], Proposal of Erection of a suitable building for records, Extract from Mr. R. Roche's Minute [Board of Revenue (MICS), 13 June, 1815, Proceedings No-57], adds a new layer of interest and authenticity to the narratives, providing a fascinating glimpse into the past. Historians seeking insight into colonial India's record-keeping practices will find this chapter useful.

The third chapter 'The Journey: Formation of the State Archives', masterfully chronicles the transformation of the State Archives of West Bengal, from its humble beginnings to its current stature. The narrative is woven together by a series of pivotal events, decisions and appointments that have shaped the archives' growth. The journey commenced with the Imperial Record Department and the simultaneous initiation of separate provincial archives of Bengal. A record room was set up in 1895, as well as housing revenue and judicial and pre-mutiny records. Chanda Bhusan Mukherjee's stewardship and subsequent appointment of Mr. Muddiman to inspect the Bengal Secretariat room marked significant milestones. The early 20th century saw the appointment of Srinath Chakravarti as a special officer, recommending the amalgamation of the Board of Revenue room and secretariat records up to 1858. Srinath Chakravarti's drafting of archival rules in 1910, formed the basic skeleton of archival rules. The historical record room became accessible to the

students of history, with regulations fixed for access. Despite facing challenges, including the transfer of the Imperial Record Office from Calcutta to Delhi, the archives continued to grow. The 1950s saw the education department taking steps to house historical records outside the Writers' Building, with the Cabinet approving the purchase of premises at 6, Bhawani Dutta Lane, Calcutta. The 1980s marked significant changes, including revised research rules, a new policy of acquiring private records, and the establishment of a special reference library. The foundation of a functional building was laid in 1989, housing the Intelligence Branch and PWD records. The chapter concludes with the Cabinet's decision in 2008 to convert the State Archives of West Bengal into a separate directorate under Higher Education Department. This decision culminated a long and eventful journey, transforming the archives into a full-fledged institution.

This book's appendix is a treasure trove of historical records. Appendix 1, rules for record keepers and their staff, ensuring proper handling and maintenance of records. Appendix 2, offering insight into the development of record keeping policies. Appendix 3, includes research rules from 1981, guiding researchers in their pursuit of knowledge. Appendix 4, presents a list of publications, showcasing the breadth of research and scholarship in the field.

The supplementary chapter 'Glimpses of Documentary Heritage', is equally fascinating, featuring: A colorful map of Calcutta's town planning, scanned documents related to the first municipal election officially declared by the Sheriff of Calcutta on 31st December, 1847, Records of significant events, such as the Revolt of 1857, the Indigo Rebellion and protests against the partition of Bengal, pictures of national heroes, like, Khudiram Bose, Prafulla Chaki and Kanailal Dutta, scanned documents detailing Rabindranath Tagore and Santiniketan under police surveillance, a full size scanned picture of the ground plan of Writers' Building. The images provide a visual narrative, a tangible connection to the past, allowing readers to connect and understand historical events in a more engaging way.

In conclusion, this book's appendix and chapter on documentary heritage offer a wealth of historical information, providing valuable insights into India's past, record-keeping practices, and the lives of national heroes. The inclusion of scanned documents and images adds a unique touch, making this book a must-read for history enthusiasts and researchers alike. Despite its ambitious scope, the book suffers from a narrow focus, neglecting the broader socio-political context that shaped archival development. The narrative is further hampered by a lack of critical analysis, relying heavily on descriptive accounts rather than nuanced exploration. Moreover, the book's failure to engage with contemporary archival theories and digital archiving practices renders it somewhat outdated. Overall, while the book provides a cursory overview, it falls short of offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex evolution of state archives in India.

Adding more visuals and contextualizing the narrative within broader historical and socio-political contexts would enrich the book. By addressing the diverse archival developments, incorporating discussions on digital archiving, allowing to appeal to a wider audience beyond those focused on West Bengal State archives.

This book's focus on the importance of archives and record-keeping practices makes it a relevant and timely resource for students and scholars in India, particularly with the UGC's introduction of Archives and Museums as a part of the Learning Outcomes-Based Curriculum Framework (LOCF), 2021, under the New Education Policy.²

References

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