WHERE DOCUMENTS SAVE HISTORY

In Haryana, Ashoka University's Archives of Contemporary India now boasts a 100-plus private-paper collection and shows why external funding is crucial for archival work

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For students of history, making pilgrimages to physical libraries only to find documents, manuscripts, etc. in poor condition on dust-laden shelves is par for the course. Often, these primary source materials have to be digitised and restored before they can be of any use.

This is where the crucially important work of archiving and restoration comes in. Several Indian universities have been making significant strides in archival work. One such is Ashoka University, a private research university in Sonipat, Haryana. Its Archives of Contemporary India (ACI) initiative, started in 2017, has recently crossed 100 private-paper collections.

Collect, filter, disseminate

Over the years, ACI has gathered documents pertaining to the economic reforms of the 1990s, scientific and technological developments, the history of women's rights, the growth of India's media sector, and so on. The collections now include political figures such as S. Radhakrishnan and Manmohan Singh, writers Kiran Nagarkar, Adil Jussawalla and Girish Karnad, journalists Anil Dharker and Nayan Chanda, among others. This initiative is backed on an ongoing basis by HDFC Ltd., with a one-time grant of ₹60 crore for setting up a library and archive on campus, according to a Deloitte report.

Founder-director Deepa Bhatnagar brought to ACI her three-decade experience from the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, where she served as head of research and publications. The self-taught archivist has worked on the papers of Motilal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari, et al. She says her "approach remains the same, whether acquiring the papers of a writer, an artist, or a political personality".

Bhatnagar adds, "We begin by studying the life, work, and contributions of the individual to understand the context and significance of their papers and then proceed accordingly with the acquisition process. When the donor is alive, the process involves direct dialogue, through email, phone or in-person meetings to explain the importance of archiving their papers. In cases where the subject is deceased, the discussion happens with the family or legal heirs. In both cases, our goal is to preserve and make accessible material of lasting historical value."

Conservation protocols

"Digitising and preserving old documents is undoubtedly a very challenging task," Bhatnagar says. "Papers often come to us in a fragile condition: torn, brittle, or affected by humidity. At the Archives of Contemporary India, we follow strict conservation protocols: use acid-free folders and boxes, temperature-controlled storage, and high-resolution, non-invasive digitisation. Photographs are encapsulated in archival polyester covers and stored in specially designed boxes." The prepared catalogue of a collection is uploaded to the ACI website, where it is freely available for download; "for access to specific files, a nominal fee is charged," she adds.

Ashoka's efforts are in line with similar initiatives at government-funded colleges. IIT Kharagpur has an enviable free-of-cost digital archive of material pertaining to computer science, mechanical engineering, all the way to literary, religious and philosophical texts.

Archiving matters

For someone writing a thesis on Indian cinema history over the last 50 years, the personal correspondence of, say, Sai Paranjpye, the only woman directing Bollywood films in the 1980s (*Sparsh, Chashme Buddoor, Katha*), will be of import. Or a compilation of a record of presidential tenures in independent India will need the official correspondence of S. Radhakrishnan.

Given the range of texts available in a professionally managed archive – newspaper interviews, audio recordings of long-forgotten speeches, photographs of international conclaves and informal get-togethers of high-profile people – it is clear why entities like ACI are valuable to students, researchers, independent scholars, both domestic and foreign. "Earlier there was a point of view that archival work only matters for students or specialists," says Prof. Abhijit Gupta of Jadavpur University (JU), a State-funded technical university in Kolkata. "But I feel that we have to move away from this view now and think in terms of public interest. After COVID, we (JU) have made a significant portion of our archives freely accessible, and we have organised 'open days'. We have held events and workshops where we teach people simple archival practices they can use to preserve family memories, old photographs that have sentimental value, and so on."

JU's School of Cultural Texts and Records (SCTR) 'Bichitra' archive is a comprehensive collection of Rabindranath Tagore's works available freely in Bangla, English and Hindi. It was created in collaboration with Visva-Bharati University and sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. Prof. Gupta says they have "archived and digitised several out-of-print Bengali children's magazines and comics" over the last decade.

While ACI's work is impressive and looks set for aggressive expansion in the years ahead, it is crucial to democratise knowledge and aid the development of first-generation scholars. For that, society must back similar projects at public universities too – politically, financially, morally – lest all research and knowledge-gathering endeavours be restricted to a privileged few.

The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.