

## RESEARCH

# The archive preserving the story of India after Independence

*The photographs tucked away in a family album, the papers dismissed as “rubbish”, and the voices of women whose stories were never written down, are some of the fragments of India's post Independence history being preserved at the Archives of Contemporary India in Ashoka University.*



Photograph of S. Radhakrishnan being welcomed by US President John F. Kennedy during his visit to America in 1963. (Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University)

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**8 min read** **New Delhi** Oct 23, 2026 11:43 AM IST ✓

First published on: Oct 23, 2026 at 11:40 AM IST

A large screen displaying photographs of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan at a landmark exhibition of Indian art in Germany is among the first things to catch the eye on entering the Archives of Contemporary India (ACI) at Ashoka University. The exhibition, 5,000 Years of Indian Art, held at Villa Hügel in Essen in 1959, was an important moment of post-war cultural diplomacy, bringing the depth and diversity of India's artistic and civilisational heritage to European audiences.

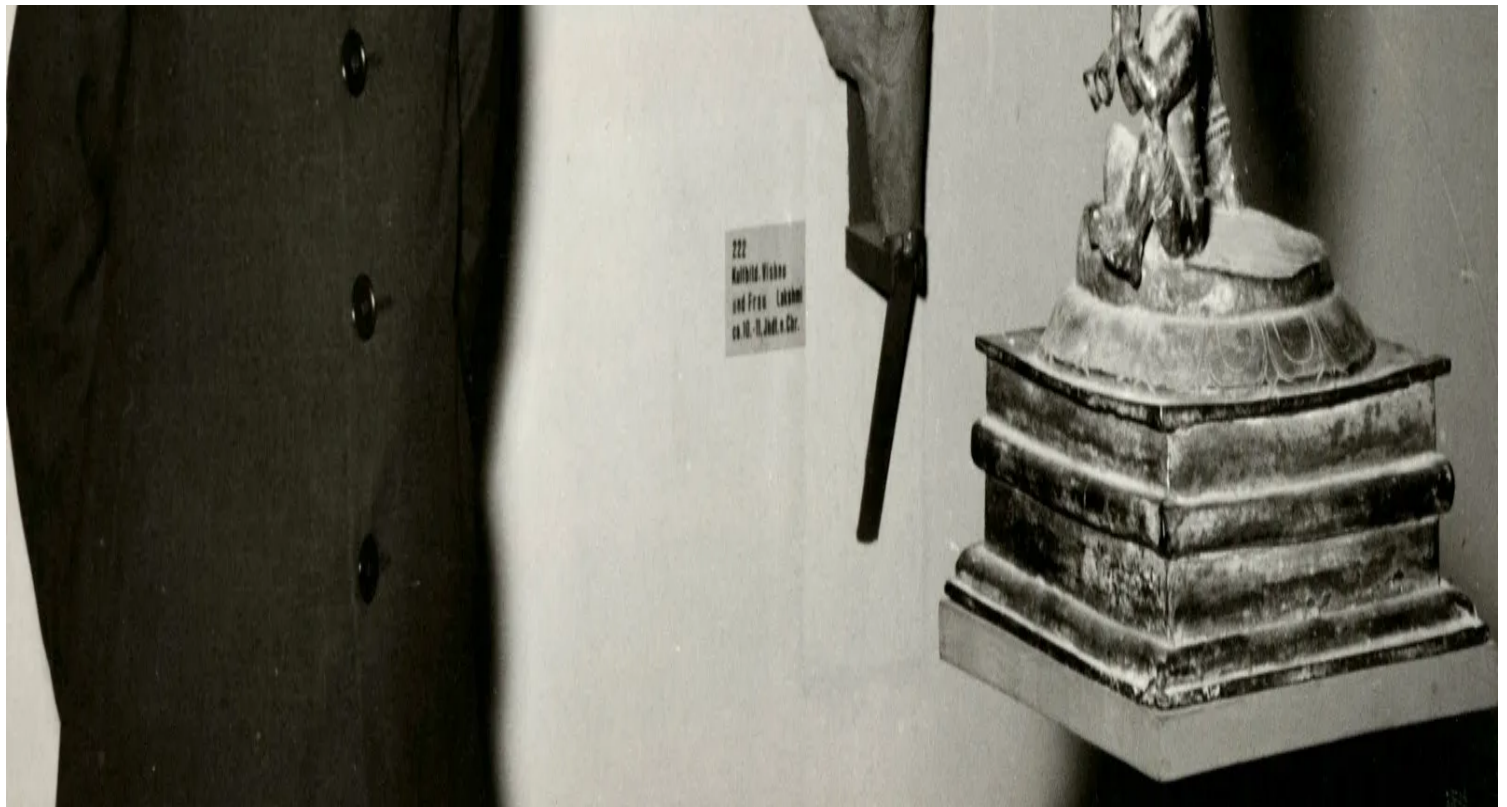
For decades, however, the exhibition had all but slipped from India's historical memory. Its traces resurfaced only a few years ago, when Deepa Bhatnagar, founding director of the ACI, and her team came across a cache of photographs tucked into an album that had been carefully preserved by Radhakrishnan's descendants at his home in [Chennai](#).

Among the other fragments of Radhakrishnan's life preserved in the archives are a 1934 letter he wrote to Mahatma Gandhi, requesting a contribution to a book he was writing on Indian philosophy; correspondence he exchanged with Rabindranath Tagore; and photographs of him being welcomed by US President John F. Kennedy during his visit to America in 1963.

The archive currently houses the private papers of 112 personalities who helped shape post-Independence India. Its holdings extend beyond the conventional history of the freedom movement to include the writings and legacies of political figures, journalists, academics, writers, environmentalists, filmmakers and others

who played an active role in independent India.





Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan at a landmark exhibition of Indian art in Germany in 1959. (Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University)

“We look beyond the conventional definition of historical significance when documenting contemporary India,” said environmental historian Mahesh Rangarajan, chair of the archives, who has been closely involved with it since its founding in 2017.

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That broader definition matters because private papers can reveal aspects of history that official records often cannot. Archival records broadly take two forms. Official papers are records created and preserved by public institutions, often documenting the decisions and workings of people in positions of power. Private papers, by contrast, include letters, memoirs, personal reflections, photographs and other material that can reveal the people and personal experiences behind those decisions.

“They often complement and enrich official records, enabling scholars and researchers to explore not only major events and institutions but also the ideas, experiences, relationships and processes that shaped them,” said Rangarajan.

But private archives present another challenge: they are often dependent on the willingness of individuals and families to deposit material that has personal, rather than historical, value. Earning that trust can take years.

## **Holding onto the memories**

When Bhatnagar first approached the renowned academic Rajmohan Gandhi in 2017 seeking his papers for the archives, he took time to respond and then to be fully persuaded. Seven years later, Gandhi himself wrote to ask whether the archives were still interested in acquiring them. The US-based historian and his wife, Usha Gandhi, invited the archives team to their home in Panchgani while they were visiting to collect the material. The papers had been stored in large trunks in the basement. Bhatnagar and her team spent nearly a week sorting through letters, lectures, book notes and other material, with Usha Gandhi

carefully supervising the process.



Deepa Bhatnagar and her team sorting through the archives. (Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University)

The Radhakrishnan family, too, was initially reluctant to part with some of his papers. While they had happily donated most of his papers to the archives, they held on to his photograph albums until the very last day.

“These are precious memories for them, which they would like to hold on to. But it is hard to preserve,” said Bhatnagar.

She made four trips to Radhakrishnan’s home in Chennai in 2018 to acquire the papers. By her final visit, she had decided not to press the family about the albums if they chose to keep them. On the last day, however, the family came forward with the albums, on the understanding that they would be properly preserved at the ACI.

The albums contained photographs of Radhakrishnan’s visits to various national institutions during his tenure as the Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University, as well as photographs from his visits abroad as the President of India.

There are also instances of families being unaware of the historical value of the papers they possess. Bhatnagar recalled meeting the late playwright Girish Karnad, who told her that he was planning to discard some material he considered “rubbish”.

“I was keen to see what this ‘rubbish’ was,” Bhatnagar said.

She was pleasantly surprised to find precisely the kind of material that would be

valued by an archive, including correspondence with producers and directors of films he had worked on, as well as papers related to the Nehru Centre in London, where he served as director in the early 2000s.



private papers and photographs preserved at the archives. (Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University)

Karnad's papers, Bhatnagar said, also revealed a side of his personality that she had not known. "I had grown up loving Karnad's films, but it was only then that I found out how academically inclined he was," she said.

Similarly, for Rangarajan, Radhakrishnan's papers revealed a persona he had not known. He was particularly struck by the extent to which Radhakrishnan took Indian philosophy to the world through his speeches and writings.

### **Whose voices make it into history?**

Yet the very process of collecting private papers raises a larger question: whose voices are most likely to find their way into an archive? People who are powerful, educated, or prominent are more likely to leave behind extensive written records, while the experiences of those outside these circles can disappear with them. The imbalance directly affects how history is written.

The Archives of Contemporary India is attempting to address this by actively collecting voices that are less likely to survive in conventional paper archives.

One example is a collection of audio interviews submitted by feminist writer Ritu Menon, documenting the experiences of marginalised women on both sides of the border during Partition.

Historian Debarati Banerjee has also been interviewing women in Uttarakhand who participated in the Chipko Movement of the 1970s. Since 2020, she has

collected and sent nearly 38 audio interviews to the ACI.

“I realised that most of these women are advanced in age, and since they cannot write, their work will never get intercepted unless it is properly archived,” said Banerjee in a phone interview.

Apart from the interviews, she is also putting together documents associated with the Chipko movement, most of which are written in Garhwali and some in Hindi.

“These people’s movements which take place in remote areas have the chance of being usurped by the erudite urban intelligentsia in a way that they would like to present to the world, which is often not the true story,” Banerjee said.

## **Preserving the past**

Preserving these papers and recordings for posterity is a painstaking process. Bhatnagar explained that it begins with disinfecting the papers, which can take close to eight hours. They are then aired for two to three weeks before being placed in acid-free boxes and transferred to the archives repository. Once there, archivists review, sort, label and catalogue the material. Fragile and brittle papers are preserved in glassine paper to prevent further deterioration.



The papers preserved at the archives (Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University)  
The final step is digitisation. Metadata for each collection is prepared and uploaded to the website, allowing the public to access the material.

What survives in an archive ultimately shapes what can be remembered. The photographs tucked away in a family album, the papers dismissed as “rubbish”, and the voices of women whose stories were never written down may seem like fragments of very different histories. But together, they determine how much of the past remains available to those who come after.

For the Archives of Contemporary India, then, preservation is not simply about saving old papers. It is also about deciding whose stories deserve to survive, and ensuring that the history of contemporary India is not told only through those who already had the power to leave a record behind.

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