

Preserving the Heritage for the Future: A Case Study on the Light of the State Archives, West Bengal

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Abstract

An archive is the primary source of historical importance. It reflects the glorious past. It is also historical evidence. However, there is a problem of deterioration. Deterioration is a characteristic of all hard documents, with the records deteriorating over time. This is why our ancestors had tried to preserve all the manuscripts and ancient documents by using or applying various traditional and modern methods and techniques. In this paper, we discuss how to protect our heritage for the future. In India, the West Bengal State Archive takes an excellent initiative for protecting the historical evidence. This paper also discusses their efforts to preserve the manuscripts.

Keywords: Preservation, Conservation, Historical Collections, State Archive, West Bengal

Introduction

Thousands of official records are being published every day. Eventually, most find their way into the garbage, under litter boxes, into bird cages, or hopefully, into recycling containers. The perception persists that old records are of no value at all. For archivists, however, that perception presents a terrific challenge. The main obstacle to the archivists is the increasing volume of records, and the simultaneous decrease in space. Easy retrieval is also a big concern. The archivist has to have strategies for easy access, before worrying about preservation. The environment is another issue, especially since our subcontinent is not constructive for preservation. The purpose of preservation is to ensure the protection of information of enduring value for access by present and

future generations. The art of preservation is as old as human civilisation itself. Preservation is a set of activities aimed at prolonging the life of a record while making as few changes as possible (Mathew, 2014).

An archive is a collection of historical records or the physical location where they are kept. It consists of primary source records, collected over the course of a person's or organisation's lifetime, and are kept to showcase that person's or organisation's function. Experienced archivists and historians often consider archives as records that have been inevitably and necessarily produced as a result of regular legal, social, administrative, or other processes. They have been symbolically described as "organism secretions", and excerpts from documents that are prepared purposefully or formed to express a specific message for posterity (Archive, 2011).

Objectives

- To show different preservation and conservation techniques used in the State Archives, Kolkata.
- To show the need for preserving ancient documents for the future.

Literature Review

Sawant (2014) explained the causes and nature of deterioration of print materials occurring in academic libraries. She also explained preservation and conservation techniques of the printed materials of the particular libraries, and found the dedication of the library

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staff to the preservation and conservation programmes in her article ‘A study on preservation practices in academic libraries in Mumbai’.

Mazumdar (2009) explained how to save manuscripts through digital preservation techniques in KKH Library in his article ‘Digital preservation of rare manuscripts in Assam’.

Kemoni (1996) found the factors that contribute to ineffective conservation of archive materials in Kenya. He also discussed the lack of planning, absence of a preservation policy, and absence of trained staff in his article ‘Preservation and conservation of archive materials: The case of Kenya’.

Mezbah-Ul-Islam (2008) in his study ‘Preservation of archives: A case study of Bangladesh National Archives’ discusses the current PAC (Preservation and Conservation) status of archives in the Bangladesh National Archive, and the hurdles that prevent the implementation of a full-fledged PAC programme in the archive. This study depends on primary and secondary information. It also gives some remedial measures, such as recruitment of qualified trained staff and developing proper infrastructure. Further, the Bangladesh National Archive should coordinate with other national libraries to safeguard the cultural heritage.

Narang (2014) in her article ‘Preservation and conservation of manuscripts and rare documents in National Archives of India and National Mission for Manuscripts’ highlights the role of the national archives of India and the national manuscripts’ mission for preserving the precious and invaluable manuscripts. This paper also deals with the factors for deterioration of manuscripts and rare documents available in the national archives of India and the 13 national manuscript resource centres in the National Manuscript Mission. This paper further deals with the process and techniques to keep these endangered documents in good health.

Methodology

We surveyed the West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata, with questionnaires consisting of two sections: i) general information, including some general questions which give us information about the archive and ii) subjective information, which focuses on the preservation and

conservation systems of the archival materials. We used the interview method as well. Not only that, we have done some literature review. Then we arranged the collected data and analysis to show a clear picture of the preservation and conservation techniques.

Scope and Coverage

The scope of this study is to show the preservation and conservation techniques in the West Bengal State Archive.

Limitation

This study is only limited to the State Archive in West Bengal.

State Archive, Kolkata

The State Archives, which is the official guardian of all historical records of the government, is a dedicated and specified wing of the West Bengal Government’s Higher Education Department. It is the world’s oldest repository of ancient documents, and its collection continues to increase in both quantity and quality over time. The State Archives’ collections are spread over three buildings. The Historical Section, located in Bhawani Dutta Lane, Kolkata, is responsible for documents ranging from 1758 to 1900. The Division, which deals with documents post 1900, is housed at the Writers’ Buildings, Kolkata. Lastly, information about the Intelligence Branch, the Public Works Department, and the Chancellor Secretariat documents are kept at the New Functional Building at Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata. The State Archives hold a unique collection of records, containing roughly a 1,000 ancient maps and 42,000 glass and film negatives and photographic prints, comprising intercepted letters, articles, and portraits of freedom fighters (*Welcome to official website of the Directorate of State Archives, Kolkata, West Bengal 2019*).

Different Sections

Records Management

Records management is the supervision, maintenance, and administration of digital and paper records. One of

the requirements of excellent record management is to make sure that files are neither deleted prematurely nor kept for a prolonged period. Along with the staff members of the record creation organisations, archivists play a very important role in the evaluation of the whole process. All government records, when they turn 25 years old, are bound to be appraised.

Consequently, two sets of records emerge – Keep (K) and Destroy (D). Hence, only the ‘K’ records are transferred to the archives.

Conservation Unit

It is of public concern and responsibility to protect the valuable archival materials. The State Archives Conservation Programme consists of: (i) precautionary measures as well as preservation where all issues which are harmful to the records are eliminated; (ii) restorative measures through fumigation and deacidification; (iii) curative measures to restore the documents to their previous condition, before acquiring tissue repair, lamination, full-pasting, binding, and so on; and (iv) replication through microfilming, photocopying, and digitisation of old and fragile records.

Research Room

As a primary source of information, historical documents reflect the origin of a government and explanation of all its activities. The information contained in the records is primarily required by the administrators to take appropriate decisions. These records are also very useful for research workers, history analysts, and archivists, to present an analysis of ancient details. Because of its unique nature, access to the archives is restricted.

Library

The State Archives Library is basically a reference library which furnishes the needs of the researchers, interns of the particular archive, and the professionals connected with their official work. The total number of holdings of this library is approximately 9,000. With a searchable catalogue, it offers access to government papers, rare publications, old periodicals, geographical records, and

recent social sciences articles. To prepare a theme-based catalogue and to try to provide a better service, a tailor-made software has been installed in the computer in the aforementioned library situated in the Bhawani Dutta Lane.

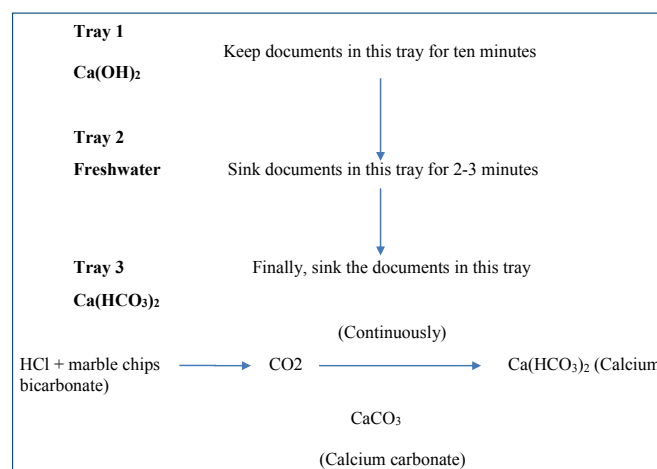
Preservation and Conservation Techniques

When a file or book comes into the State Archive for repair, they are first paginated according to the page numbers. The stitching of the book or file is then opened; finally, it is washed for deacidification.

Deacidification Process

Aqueous Method/Barros Method

In this process, the documents which are less acidic, printed, and soluble in water are deacidified.



Firstly, all the documents are placed in a calcium hydroxide solution for ten minutes. After that, the documents are placed in the freshwater tray for two to three minutes. Next, the documents are placed in a calcium bicarbonate solution for treatment. These treated documents are then placed in the drying rack; later, the flattening of the documents is done. Finally, the documents are sent for binding.

Non-Aqueous Method

In this process, documents which are acidic, brittle, and insoluble in water are deacidified; the following technique is used: 100ml methanol (CH_3OH) + 2 gr Barium Hydroxide Ba(OH)_2 . This solution is then brushed over

the brittle documents. After some time, the methanol evaporates.

Gaseous Method

NH₄ is sprayed over the affected files, books, and documents.

Dry Method

A spray gun is used for the dry method.

Finely powdered calcium carbonate is used in the spray gun. Then, the powder is sprayed over the brittle materials, thus neutralising the acidic content of extremely fragile documents. Next, the documents are set aside for drying. After that, the flattening of the documents is done. Later, the documents are sent for binding.

After deacidification, tissue repairing and full pasting is done. Wax paper is used for it.

Tissue Pasting and Full Pasting

CMC glue or refined flour glue is used for this technique.

Full pasting is used since 1897.

Stitching

It is mainly of three types:

- Four sewing (stitching by creating holes)
- Sewing with handmade paper and tape
- Leipeta stitching

Process

At first the documents are arranged with maintaining signatures. Then the documents are pasted and pressed in a pressing machine. After that, small holes are created and sewn with tape. Then, Sirish glue is applied. Now the papers are attached one with the other. After sometime the documents are placed in a rounding and backing machine. Then, a cardboard is attached with the binding cloth. Finally, a page, called the Pustin, is attached.

Solvent Lamination

This lamination is used for extremely brittle documents.

First, a tissue paper is taken, and then an acetate foil is attached to the tissue. Then, the main document is placed. Next, they attach an acetate foil and finally attach the tissue paper. Now the capsule is ready for solvent lamination.

A cotton swab is drowned in acetone and then pulled from the centre sideways.

Archival document mending should be reversible. Archival documents can be categorised into three types:

- Current – Those records which are recently created.
- Semi current – All the departmental records fall in this category.
- Non-current – These records have historical and administrative value. These documents will be in the archive after 30 years.

Archive

They classify archival materials department-wise, chronologically, and Company period (till 1858).

Then, the record is divided into A, B, and C.

Class A: To be permanently preserved; two copies are there – one is in the British Library and the other is in the State Archive, West Bengal.

Class B: No copy found.

Class C: To be destroyed.

Need to Preserve Archival Materials

This explains why we need preservation of archival materials.

- *Compendium of Information*: It reflects social, economic, and political situations of a particular time.
- *The Backdrop to History*: From the archive, we get raw materials which form the backdrop to history.
- *Capturing Genetic Evolution*: It is important to know the past for developing the future.

Suggestion

- Regular dusting should be done.

- Air conditioning system should be there to control humidity and temperature.
- Trained staff needed.

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