BOOK REVIEW

Archiving the British Raj: History of the Archival Policy of the Government of India, with Selected Documents, 1858–1947. by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Hardcover, 2019, ISBN: 9780199489923.

Memory institutions essentially comprise libraries, museums, and archives, which convey knowledge and ingenuity across the spatial borders crossing temporal boundaries in diverse languages and customs. Besides libraries, museums, and galleries, archives also convey experience and creativity across the borders of time and space, languages, customs, and people. This book, written by eminent historian and former chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, explores the socio-historical-political discourses in the formation of the National Archives of India.

This book is systematically structured in a chronological manner. In the Introduction chapter, Bhattacharya narrates the kind of dilemmas and necessity of an Imperial Record Office for the British Indian government. He writes, "there was strong and consistent bureaucratic opposition to access by non-officials for research purposes" (p. 4), while few British serving in India were in favour of the idea that the IRO should be open to historical research to the researchers and writers. Chapter 1, titled "Absence of a Definite Archives Policy, 1858-71" discusses the contribution of historian James Tallboys Wheeler as the Secretary of Records Committee, 1863-69, in developing a comprehensive guide to the records of the GoI. This Chapter includes an Appendix titled "J.T. Wheeler's Report on the Indian Records in 1962" that sets a framework for the future development of an institutional structure in the country. He recommended a Central Muniment Room, i.e., a central record office. Instead of a central muniment room, the Records Committee Chairman Mr. Walter Scott Seton-Kerr urged decentralized record-keeping in different departments. Seton-Kerr also disagreed with allocating financial resources to appoint a record keeper and archival staff for the Central Muniment Office. Thus, a failed attempt was made immediately after the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (or Sepoy Mutiny) in establishing a Central Muniment Office. In Chapter 2, titled "Developments Leading to the Creation of a Central Archive, 1872-91", Bhattacharya compares the British record-keeping model, their Public Record Office (PRO) in England, and whether the British model feasible in India.

In Chapter 3, titled "The Imperial Record Department, Objectives and Achievements, 1891-1926", Bhattacharya discusses how the Imperial Record Department (IRD) was formed on 11th March 1891 at Calcutta that would later serve the purposes of a National Archives. IRD was expected to perform some routine functions, such as "(i) acquisition of records from government departments who sent to its records no longer considered useful, (ii) restoration and preservation of documents, and (iii) supply of specific documents to government departments as and when required by a government department" (p. 100). IRD further assumed additional responsibilities, e.g., "(i) publication of selected records from the state papers in possession of the IRD, (ii) preparation of press lists, i.e., annotated lists of records in a classified form, and (iii) preparation of calendar of documents, i.e., abstracts of documents enlisted chronologically for each segment of correspondence and records of the Indian government" (p. 100). IRD was later shifted from Calcutta to the new British India capital New Delhi in 1911 and at its present location in 1926. IRD became the National Archives of India (NAI) after India's independence in 1947.

In Chapter 4, titled "Anticipations of Freedom, 1927-47", Bhattacharya describes how IRD facilitated the freedom of access to the archives and helped in transition in historiography in the country. A bright set of historians got engaged with the collections in the IRD and other provincial archives for writing an evidence-based history of the subcontinent.

The book further explores the national policies and strategies to facilitate access to archived and preserved collections available at IRD and different state archives to the extended users, including historians and social scientists.

As part of the 125th Foundation Day celebrations, NAI launched the Abhilekh Patal (Abhilekh-patal.in) – a searchable portal to make the rich archival treasure accessible to scholars and users. Approximately 2.5+ million records of reference

media have already been uploaded on the portal. Additionally, NAI launched the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Papers (Netajipapers.gov.in) on 23rd January 2016. This portal provides access to political records related to Bose from the holding departments, viz., the Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of External Affairs, and Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

Bhattacharya describes how a vital information infrastructure got unfolded during the British Raj, the political dilemmas surrounding the development, and positive outcomes from the erstwhile IRD, which paved the way to well-stocked and enriched collections of archival materials that belong to the Nation. As the author passed away before publishing this print edition, a few typos remain uncorrected. This book is an essential contribution for a wide readership, such as historians, social scientists, policymakers, archivists, and other researchers.

Reviewed by

Anup Kumar Das
Centre for Studies in Science Policy
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi, India
Email: anup_csp@jnu.ac.in