

# ARCHIVES AND RECORDS: WHAT ARE THEY ?

PURNENDU BASU



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

# ARCHIVES AND RECORDS : WHAT ARE THEY ?

By

PURNENDU BASU

*Director, United Nations Information Service,  
Accra, Ghana*



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA  
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION  
NEW DELHI

## PREFACE

The three articles covering the following pages were originally published in a series in *The Indian Archives*, an official journal of the National Archives of India. Written by Dr. Purnendu Basu, sometime Director of Archives, Government of India, the articles were intended to introduce to a layman the subject of archives and their administration. In view of the interest they are likely to awaken these articles have now been reprinted in the form of a brochure. It is hoped that the brochure will prove useful to those interested in the subject.

*New Delhi,  
22nd October, 1960.*

**S. Roy**  
*Director of Archives,  
Government of India..*

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. Records and Archives : What are They ? ..	7
II. Why preserve Records ? .. ..	16
III. Enemies of Records .. .. ..	26

## RECORDS AND ARCHIVES: WHAT ARE THEY?

PERHAPS a word of explanation is necessary for foisting on readers of an advanced technical journal, who are professionals in the field, an article which can at best be considered as elementary. In theory, this would be unpardonable and to genuine professionals I make my apologies. But the actual situation is something like this. In India the number of professional archivists can be counted on one's fingers on one hand and then leave a large margin. This is not a rash statement; nor could it be otherwise. In a country where there are no railroads, you are not likely to meet with railroad engineers. Similarly where there are only a few organized archives, the number of archivists is bound to be limited. In the India which was under direct British government until 1947, organized central archive offices existed at the Centre (in New Delhi), in Madras, and in Bengal. Of the rest of the provinces, some had central record offices in an incipient form as in the Punjab, some none at all, while in a few some sort of half-hearted attempts were being made to establish such offices. Of the Native States, some had fairly well organized record offices, like Baroda, Kolhapur, Pudukkottai, Patiala, Alwar, Hyderabad, Bhopal and a few others. Others like Jaipur, Udaipur, Travancore, Mysore, etc., had combined record offices and manuscript libraries, and the little that is known of their organization and management suggests that they were more general repositories hardly following any definite archival policy. There was, however, one common feature between all these existing record offices, from the one in New Delhi down to the least known one; the emphasis in all of them, more or less, was on archives as historical materials preserved primarily for the use of the research scholar. The place of

archives in administration was hardly realized. The concept of archival institutions as service agency to administration has not yet been generally accepted in India. This was the situation generally in Europe till the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and continues to be so in most Latin American countries and in some States in the U.S.A. India, like the latter group, to this date holds mid-Victorian views about archives; in consequence the prevalent notions about records are also mid-Victorian, in total disregard of the development of more modern concepts which, incidentally, are not modern at all, but a renewed appreciation of the more classical concept.

I propose to explain in this article the two terms 'records' and 'archives', those tangible or intangible qualities which give record or archive quality to certain documents and not to others though they may be very similar in form and content, and the extent to which archive material differs from library or other reference material, manuscript or otherwise. In a subsequent article I shall try to show the purpose which records should and can serve, their place in administration and their other uses. Finally, it is my intention to outline the procedure by following which those objectives can best be attained, to what extent such procedures are followed in India and what can be done to place archives administration in India on a genuinely sound footing.

First, the word *Record*. This comes from a Latin word *recordari* meaning to be mindful of. This again originates from the Latin *cor* (=heart), the only relationship between 'heart' and 'being mindful of' being that at one time the heart was believed to be the seat of one's memory; hence the expression 'to learn by heart'. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1933 edition) gives a number of definitions of 'records', all of which emphasize that a record is something committed to writing in order to preserve the memory of a fact or event. From further descriptions and explanations it becomes clear that records can take almost any physical form—books, manuscripts, papers,

maps, photographs or other documentary materials. The meaning in which the term is generally used today is somewhat more precise and there are certain conditions which a document must satisfy before it can be classed as a record. In the first place, records presuppose a record creator which may be an individual, a family, an institution, a commercial or other organization, or a government agency. In this list, government at all levels is by far the greatest record creator. Secondly, records must be created for a specific purpose—either in pursuance of a legal requirement or in connection with the transaction of the creator's business. For instance, in a factory the law may require that certain standards of sanitation be maintained and that periodical reports on that subject be made to the factory inspection authorities. These reports are records created in pursuance of a legal requirement. On the other hand, policy papers, personnel papers, production charts, maintenance reports, sales promotion plans and sales records, budgeting and accounting papers, and so on, constitute the records created in connection with the business of that factory. Similarly with government agency records. Finally, only such documents which satisfy the above conditions and are, furthermore, preserved (or are appropriate for preservation) by the creating agency (or its legitimate successor) are deemed to be records proper. Their claim to be preserved, of course, depends on their utility, for no one in his senses is going to clutter up valuable space with documents which have no value. This utility has been termed by many as "retention value" which seems to be a good descriptive term. What constitute retention values will be dealt with in the next article. To sum up: records are the books, papers, maps, photographs or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by a government agency, institution or organization, family or individual, in pursuance of law or in connection with the transaction of its business and preserved or appropriate for

preservation by that government agency, institution, organization, family or individual or its legitimate successors.

There exists some doubt in the minds of some people whether the papers of private individuals and families are records proper. The doubt is material, but it might be safe to give such papers the benefit of the doubt if they are found to have been preserved with the deliberate intention of keeping them permanently so that they may bear evidence to certain transactions and that they had been subjected to some rational organization with this purpose in view.

Among official records, two types are most easily discernible—first, those that are created deliberately, and secondly, those that grow up without any deliberate pre-conceived plan. In the first category would fall what are known as the Note Sheets in our governmental files, reports by experts and others, expenditure vouchers, and so on. In the second category comes correspondence which is the by-product of a transaction. These days quite a sizeable body of records belonging to the second category do not come into physical being, business being transacted orally over the telephone or across the luncheon table. Sometimes memoranda are kept of these transactions, often they are not, and it is only by referring to later records that one can sometimes infer that some communication was made between two or more persons relating to a particular transaction.

Our second term is *Archives*. This word is derived from the Greek *archeion* meaning that which belongs to an office. This again has its origin in the word *arche* which has a number of meanings and, consequently, a number of derivatives with different connotations. *Arche* means: (1) beginning, origin, first cause; (2) first place, power, sovereignty, empire, realm; and (3) magistracy, office. From the first of these sets is derived the Greek *archaios* meaning old, ancient, etc., and from this we have such derivatives as *archaic*, *archaeology*. From the second

set is derived *architekton* (chief builder) from which we get *architect*, *archbishop*, etc. From the third set is derived the word *archeion* which, in turn, gives birth to *archives*. The word has had an interesting evolution. From the Greek was derived the Latin *archivium* from which was coined the French word *l'archive* (feminine, singular) and later the collective *les archives*. From the French came the English *archives* in the collective sense. Now even in English different uses are made of the word. For instance, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Deputy Keeper of the Records of England, uses the singular form to mean a single document. Dr. Roscoe Hill of the United States has suggested a whole series of terminology originating from *archives*, e.g., *archive*=a depository; *archives*=the records in an archive; *archivalize*=to consign a record to an archive; *archivology*=the science of the administration of archives, and so on. Whichever of these terms one may find acceptable in whatever form, generally speaking in the English language the term *archives* signifies at least three distinct things—the records themselves, the building which houses the records, and the administrative set up responsible for the maintenance of the records and servicing them. For instance, in New Delhi by "archives" would be understood any of the three things: (1) the red and brown stone building on Queensway which houses the records of the Government of India; (2) the records inside this building; and (3) the office of the Director of Archives of the Government of India.

According to the old Greek meaning of the term anything belonging to an office would become its *archives*, including even furniture and equipment. Today, however, the meaning is restricted. I shall leave out the two derived meanings, building and administrative set up, and confine myself to the body of records housed in an archival institution. An archivist's conception of *archives* has been stated to be as follows: the organized body of records created or received by a government agency, institution, organization, family or individual and preserved by that

agency, etc., or its legitimate successors as evidence of its organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations or other activities or because of the informational data contained therein.

It will be seen from the above that an archivist's conception of archives is narrower than the meaning popularly attached to the word. Popular belief gives archive quality to things like an historical manuscript, in fact, any old manuscript, an isolated copper plate or stone inscription, letters of ancient rulers and important persons no matter for what purpose written and circumstances in which they survived, besides a host of other things. Strictly speaking, however, archives do not include them in their fold. Archives are essentially all records. But are all records archives? In English, archives is understood to mean only non-current records of permanent interest whether or not they have been transferred to a specialized central repository, but which have been segregated from the current records. In the Romanic languages no distinction is made between archives in the English sense and current records. Eugenio Casanova, the celebrated Italian archivist and one of the pioneers in systematizing the science of archive administration, distinguishes the two by using the terms *archivio corrente* and *archivio di deposito*, the first meaning current records and the second archives. But that usage has not been common. Perhaps the English meaning of the word is the best. But trouble arises as soon as an attempt is made to define what is "non-current". It has to be defined more or less arbitrarily and non-currency may vary from agency to agency.

In this connection I may refer to what has been described as the Life History of Record, a concept spelled out, I understand, by Philip Brookes, of the National Archives of the United States. To illustrate the life history of records, he conceives of a diagram which has at one end all the elements which go to create records and at the other the archives. In between these two extremes:

come, successively the stages and treatments through which records pass. The first stage is that of their use in day-to-day administration for the purpose for which they were originally created. This is the stage of currency. The next stage is that of their being "recorded" either with or without an indication of how long they should be kept, their re-examination at the end of the pre-conceived period and the weeding out of the valueless material. Still retained by the creating agency, this may be called the stage of semi-currency. The files may be either very active during this period or they may be comparatively non-active depending on the contents of the files and the agency concerned. But the crucial point is that they are no longer required for the purpose for which they were originally created, but for ancillary service to other transactions. In an ideal situation, these semi-current records would be segregated from the current records. Finally comes the stage when the semi-current files become practically non-active for administrative purposes. By that time all materials of ephemeral interest in them have been weeded out and only the cream remains. They are no longer required for reference by the creating agency frequently enough to warrant their being further retained by the creating agency, and they are then ripe to be transferred to the central archives as non-current records for indefinite retention. Care is taken to use the word "indefinite retention" instead of "permanent retention", for from experience it has been found that sometimes it happens that the information contained in a body of such records is duplicated somewhere else and that they can be destroyed without any loss either to administration or to scholarship. Archives then are records of enduring value no longer required by the creating agency for frequent reference.

I shall conclude this article by describing what are the characteristics of archives and how they differ from other reference materials. From the survey which has gone before, it is fairly simple to delineate the characteristics

of archives. The first characteristic is the relationship that archives bear to a creating agency. The archives of a particular agency are intended to reflect the policies, functions, organizations and transactions of that agency alone and nothing else, and from this fact is derived the first major principle of archive administration namely, *that the archives of a given creator should in no circumstances be intermingled with those of another creator.*

The second characteristic is the official character of archives or, in other words, the fact of their being the product or by-product of transactions having legal effects. From this characteristic flows the second major principle of archive administration, namely, *archives must remain in the custody of the creator or his legitimate successor in order to ensure that no tampering has been done with them from outside so that they may be acceptable in the court of law as valid evidence of a transaction.*

The third characteristic of archives is their uniqueness, which is self-evident. A record is created for one specific purpose and none other whatsoever and, therefore, *qua* record it may not be repeated anywhere else.

The fourth characteristic is the organic character of archives. As a transaction progresses records relating to it grow naturally. Each piece in a file is a consequence of some preceding piece or pieces, and the former is explained and elaborated by the latter. Torn from each other or taken in sequence different from that in which they were created, records cease to tell a story or, what is worse, tell a wholly inaccurate story. In order to retain their quality of reflecting accurately what has gone before and how, the original order of records should in no circumstances be disturbed to conform to some logical pattern as followed in libraries or some fancy pattern to suit the humour of an individual. This *sanctity of the original order* is the fourth basic principle of archive administration.

The distinction of archives from library and other reference materials is that the latter do not have the above characteristics. Books in a general library or items in a historical manuscript library are *collections* of isolated pieces which have been, *after collection*, put in some sort of logical order. Archives, on the other hand, are *accumulations* rather than collections and their order and arrangement are determined as they grow and not afterwards. Other reference materials do not have the official character or relationship with a creating agency essential to archives. Nor are they unique, though they may be rare and not more than a single copy of a book or manuscript may be known to exist, in the sense in which archives are unique, namely, the former are created (published or written) for general use, the latter in the course of one specific transaction.

## II

### WHY PRESERVE RECORDS ?

**I**N the first article of this series it has been seen that Records are the products of transactions of which they form an integral part. As a transaction progresses, documents relating to it accumulate, usually not according to any preconceived plan, but as occasions arise. By the time the activity ends there is a quantity of documents which reflect the history and the process of that particular transaction. They alone remain as complete evidence of the thoughts and activities relating to that transaction. It is known that all responsible agencies, whether a governmental agency, a business agency or private institution, have a tendency to keep either all or some of these documents. For such a universal tendency there must be some reasons of universal application which, once found, would provide the key to the answer to the question put in the title of this article.

Whenever we keep by something, we do so because we attach some value to it. This value can be assessed in terms of future use, some advantage to be derived at a future date. The thing preserved may be intrinsically worth a good deal of money later on; it may afford protection to one's life, property or reputation; it may facilitate the later execution of some plan; the owner may derive just an emotional pleasure in the mere thought of possessing it. With these future uses in mind we spend time and money over the continued preservation of those objects, and the greater the value attached to the object, the greater should normally be the thought and care bestowed on the problem of its preservation.

These same considerations hold good for records which all through known history have shown a tendency to

survive their creators. It is true that this phenomenon has not manifested itself with an equal degree of universality in all ages and in all countries, but speaking generally the statement made above will not perhaps be seriously challenged. It may also be stated without fear of contradiction that, so far as governmental records are concerned, the tendency for records to accumulate has grown with the expanding sphere and growing complexity of governmental activities. To go back to the question of the creation of records, what is the pattern of the organization of agencies which are the creators of records? The basic facts about organization of agencies are these: An agency consists of a group of people working together towards a common end. The process is broken down into parts which give us the major functions of the agency. These are in turn broken down into 'lines of activity'. The centre of the agency is its 'policy-making' part, and the responsibility shouldered by it is delegated to 'panels of operation' or 'lines of activity'. Another kind of activity is the 'staff and service activity'. This is composed of people who facilitate the 'line activities', e.g. investigators, researchers, etc.

All these functions—policy-making, operation and facilitating services—performed by different persons or groups of persons are directed towards a common end. If it is desired that the end is achieved with the least dissipation of energy, it is obviously necessary that all these different activities directed towards the common end should be co-ordinated and integrated. Left to themselves there is every likelihood of their working at cross-purposes with each other, duplication of effort and general waste of energy, time and money. The need for co-ordination becomes all the greater since most of the activities extend over a period of time. How can this co-ordination be effected? In an agency with its many parts and multifarious activities, it is not possible for any one individual or group of individuals to remember what specific job has been assigned to different sections and what parts of the

job to different individuals in a section. It is like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle without a physical form of which the shape is determined only as the work progresses. Until its pieces are given some sort of tangible form, it is beyond human power to put them together to form a coherent whole. Records which document the policy planning and operational activities of individuals and sections are the only conceivable means of giving tangible shape to intangible thoughts and work processes. By means of records alone can be judged whether a particular policy laid down is being executed in the way it was intended, the progress of the work and the results.

Furthermore, for any responsible agency, it is necessary constantly to look back and see what has gone on before. This is necessary, first, in order to avoid going over again what has already been completely threshed out and thus wasting time and energy (as well as money), and secondly, to ensure that nothing is done in flat and unwarranted contradiction of some earlier decisions, laws and regulations ending in embarrassment. These are all the more important for a government. In a complex organization of today it is again not possible for anyone to remember all that has gone on before and records are again the only means of refreshing one's memory with any degree of certainty. Records constitute the tangible memory of an organization.

It is also well known that for the efficient planning as well as performance of any function it is essential that it should be possible to fix responsibility on individuals who should be answerable to a superior authority. The saying "What is everybody's business is nobody's business" is an acknowledged cliche, but it is true all the same and perhaps nowhere it is more apparent than in the realm of governmental activity. Responsibility for any action can be fixed definitely only if there is provision for correctly reconstructing past deliberations and decisions and the course of individual actions. Left to memory alone, there

may be contradiction between the recollections of different persons, unconscious distortion or deliberate misrepresentation of facts. It is actually leaving too much to chance to expect that without records any transaction can be reconstructed correctly after the passage of even a few days. To quote Fritz Morstein Marx,<sup>1</sup> an authority on public administration, "a complete record is the most objective reporter, and hence the most effective means of exacting responsibility. This is also attested by the fact that the simplest manoeuvre to escape responsibility has always been the manipulation or even destruction of the record." Cases bearing out the truth of the last sentence would be familiar to most administrators in India as elsewhere. Says Dr. Marx, "One of the essentials of responsible administration is transparency of the administrative process in terms of both what is going on today and what has gone on before. In the realm of government, the requirement of transparency relates to political as well as managerial needs." I have already referred to the managerial needs and the part played by records in "charting the course of institutional policy, determining programme priorities, and infusing a unity of purpose into the whole organization." These needs are obvious to any administrator, but if further endorsement by experts is needed, here are at least two. The Taft Commission on Economy and Efficiency (of U.S. Federal Administration) reporting in 1912 in its Memorandum of Conclusions identified the three needs, viz. (a) the need for "obtaining all the papers relating to a particular subject," i.e. completeness of the record, (b) the need for "rapidity" of access, and (c) the need for adequacy of cross referencing. The second authority is that of the British report published in 1918 of the Machinery of Government Committee under the Chairmanship of Viscount Haldane and including among its members such persons as the late Beatrice Webb. It said that the administrative body should make better provision

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Morstein Marx, *The Role of Records in Administration*, a paper read before the Society of American Archivists, Oct. 25, 1946. In the subsequent portion of this article I have freely borrowed from Dr. Marx.

for "the organized acquisition of facts and information, and for the systematic application of thought, as preliminary to the settlement of policy and its subsequent administration." Again, the Committee pointed out that a department head "must have at his disposal, and under his control, an organization sufficient to provide him with a general survey of existing knowledge on any subject within his sphere, with tables of statistics and comment upon such tables which will keep him in touch with the progress of any work that can be expressed in this form, and with reports upon questions affecting the department's work which require scientific knowledge in their preparation. What is needed in these cases is a competent, swift, and self-contained inquiry for the purpose of enabling a particular Minister to deal with a specific administrative problem." All this can only be attained through adequate documentation and maintenance of records.

So much for the need of proper documentation and maintenance of records to ensure efficient management. As an evidence of the truth of the obverse, that the absence of proper record management is not conducive to efficient administration, Dr. Marx quotes from the Letter-to-the-Editor section of *The Economist*, where the personnel chief of a commercial firm in England, exasperated with the central department in charge of the employment exchanges, wrote that employers would not look with much confidence on the Exchanges "until the Ministry's Dickensian record systems and office organizations are changed to something more in keeping with the present age." Do we in India have to go far out of our way to echo this observation?

As to the political needs of the "transparency of the administrative process," I cannot do better than quote Dr. Marx himself. He says, "Perhaps the most characteristic feature of democracy is its insistence that public business be conducted along the lines of public preference and under the eyes of the public. The implications of this principle are manifest in every part of the machinery of

representative government—unimpeded public debate of political issues; presentation to the voter of alternative proposals advanced by different parties; free elections held periodically; supremacy of lawmaking vested in popular assemblies; and accountability of the executive branch. Each part, indispensable in forming the whole, serves as a guarantee that the people's common affairs remain their own in a real sense. As a corollary, all phases in the pursuit of public purposes must be illuminated by public knowledge of means and ends.

"This is particularly true of securing accountability of the executive branch. In the first place, in order to obtain accountability it is necessary to devise proper channels of legislative inquiry. .... It is obvious that without at least a minimum of reasonably well-understood procedures for drawing information from governmental officials, the legislature would be unable to hold them accountable for the exercise of their authority.

"Equally important is a second factor—the basis of the information they are called upon to furnish. It would amount to a defeat of legislative inquiry should they be free to make up their stories as they saw fit. If they could not be pinned down to incontrovertible facts, their explanations would be of little value. Thus the state of administrative records is of vast significance to the efficacy of democratic control."

To this may be added, records also provide the government official with good defence when his actions in official capacity are subjected to unwarranted criticism and his good faith is called in question.

So far I have dealt with the value of records when they are more or less in a state of currency. It may be argued, and it is argued, "Very well, let records serve their purpose of refreshing one's memory about the course of a transaction while that transaction is in progress. But

when that is over and a reasonable time has elapsed thereafter during which questions are likely to be asked about the transaction, the records related to it cease to be of any value and may safely be destroyed." There is some force in this argument and it is certainly applicable to a certain part, perhaps the greater part, of the records created in government agencies. But there are some records which possess intrinsically or acquire later on other values besides administrative value. Mention was made in the first article of 'retention values' of records. What are these retention values? It would be relevant to remind the reader here that in these articles I have confined myself mainly to governmental records.

First of these values is, of course, administrative value. It has already been seen to what extent the efficient working of an agency depends on competent creation and maintenance of its records. Those remarks are mainly for records during their period of currency or immediately after. As records become non-current, that is, they are no longer required for reference in connection with the transaction of which they were the product, the time comes to judge who else may be interested in them. In the first place, agencies other than the creating ones. For instance, fiscal documents filed by one agency mainly for the purpose of auditing may be useful to another agency which, in later years, has the charge of protecting the Government against claim cases. Then, there is the interest of outsiders, which is a very important matter. Most records, particularly of municipalities and such local bodies, are evidence of the rights of citizens or of their obligations to fellow citizens. Birth, marriage and death records have bearing on the question of citizenship and rights inherent in citizenship, records relating to transfer of property are needed to clear up disputed inheritance cases; election registers evidence the right of people to participate in the government of the country. Police and court records often bear evidence to the fact that a delinquent has atoned for his delinquency or that accusations

against one were baseless; tax returns prove that some citizens have met certain of their obligations to the State. Other records again establish the rights of certain citizens to follow certain avocations. Finally, the citizen can, from the records, check up on how his representative has shared in running the government and how his hard-earned money paid in the shape of taxes has been spent.

Another set of values are the 'research values'—admittedly a very wide and amorphous term. It can have a hundred different facets and he would be a bold man indeed who would dare list them. The matters of interest for research change from time to time and are ever increasing. Fifty years ago in India practically the only subjects of research among records which one could imagine were genealogy and political history. Since then records have been used for such variety of purposes as tracking social and economic trends, evolution of political thought and practices, geographical and industrial development, planning of social services by studying population trends, military tactics, scientific progress and a multitude of others.

In deciding what is of value, some feel that only what is old is valuable. This seems to be the dominating idea held by scholars in this country. The very simple fact that what is fresh today will eventually become old is surprisingly often lost sight of. In evaluating records one has to, so to say, project himself into the future.

As to the utilization of government records, what do we find in actual practice? It has already been stated that records are preserved by governments, institutions, etc., primarily for their own administrative reference purposes. The truth of this statement would be borne out by the following statistics: on an average every year the National Archives of India performs reference service of various kinds to the extent of handling roughly 25,000 inquiries involving consultation of records in its custody. Of these

at least 20,000 inquiries come from the various Ministries and operating Departments of the Government of India; the remaining 5,000 or so include inquiries made by state or foreign governments for administrative purposes, private citizens for personal purposes (legal, genealogical or others) and historical research scholars. Yet popular belief would have it that the archives exist solely for the purpose of historical research. Some people, otherwise knowledgeable, even believe that the real name of the National Archives of India is the 'Historical Record Office'—we often receive letters thus addressed to us. Such people also believe that the function of a government record office is not only to assist scholars but actually to do historical research. Then others, among them even administrators of long standing, seek to distinguish between 'administrative records' and 'historical records'. It will be sufficient to point out here that the distinction between 'administrative' and 'historical' records is a highly artificial one. All records are created and preserved by their creators for administrative purposes, and never for the specific purpose of historical research, i.e. research by scholars for the purpose of writing history. At the same time, all records are potential sources of historical knowledge inasmuch as they record certain events and are the authentic evidence of the courses of certain events. Record offices have been in existence from the earliest times of organized administration, but the systematic use of records for historical research purposes dates back to barely a century.

What is obvious is that records are source materials of history. Government's records are as much sources of history as any other records, but they are not the only sources nor do they contain a complete account of the course of the nation's history. They are limited to the extent to which government's activities form part of the totality of the nation's activities as a whole. Only if one could get together all records, of government, semi-governmental institutions, private bodies and individuals, of

a particular country for a particular period, one would have practically the complete source materials for the history of that country for that period. Thus, although government's records are not created specifically to provide material for historical research, by their very nature they become one of the most valuable tools for that purpose, a fact which is usually borne in mind by an intelligent and progressive administration.

To sum up in the words of Philip C. Brooks, another contemporary administrator and specialist in records management: "Records are the means by which public officials in a democracy are accountable to the people. They are tools of administration, the memory of an organization, the embodiment of experience, protectors of legal rights and sources of many kinds of information." Dr. Brooks adds: "records are often taken for granted, but they merit real attention if good government is to be realized." It will be my object to show in the following article what constitutes that "real attention."

---

<sup>2</sup> Philip C. Brooks, *Public Records Management*, p. 1.

### III

## ENEMIES OF RECORDS

IT has been seen what are government records and why at least some of them merit expenditure of time and money for their indefinite preservation. The next question to consider is, how best to preserve the records and administer them so that they fulfil the purposes for which they are preserved. Obviously, their mere preservation is not enough; they must be kept in such a way that they can be used. There are three aspects to the question: (1) the physical preservation of the valuable records; (2) their organization so that they may be easily consulted; and (3) preventing their improper use. All these three are of equal importance and all of them call for certain comparatively expensive measures. I shall make a dogmatic statement here, and it is that only by concentrating the valuable records in a properly equipped central repository can a government ensure their proper preservation, physical and moral, proper organization and maximum service out of them. Some of my justifications for such a statement will be brought out in this article wherein I shall deal with the enemies of records touching also briefly on their antidotes.

What are the principal enemies of records? They are, generally speaking, time, fire, water, light, heat, dust, humidity, atmospheric gases, fungi, vermin, "acts of God" and, last but not least, human beings. All these have deleterious effects on record materials and unless timely steps are taken to neutralize these effects, the records are destined to perish. Most of these factors present more acute problems in a tropical country like India. The principal record materials are paper, parchment, palm leaf (in India), ink, typewriter ribbon, carbon, pencil, wax (for seals), leather, cloth, photographic films and prints, and

sound recordings. They all tend to deteriorate with time and with careless handling. Fire can of course reduce a whole lot of records into ashes, and an inundation can reduce them into a mass of pulp, later dried into solid blocks with the writing washed out. "Acts of God" like an earthquake or a stroke of lightning or man-made war with its bombing and incendiaryism can similarly destroy records. Only certain precautions can be taken against such eventualities and after that trust has to be placed in luck. But for such of the enemies of records as heat, light, humidity, atmospheric gases, dust, fungi and vermin, modern research has succeeded in devising effective preventives and antidotes which any record repository worth the name should be equipped with. We will take up each of these in turn and then turn back to less controllable factors. Since paper constitutes the principal record material with which we are concerned today, I shall mainly deal with the effect of these elements on paper.

Without going into the details of paper manufacture it can be stated in brief that paper consists chiefly of cellulose fibres bound together by means of "sizing" consisting of rosin or rosin and alum or some such substance for greater strength frequently "coated" for greater opacity and for providing better writing or printing surface. The inherent strength of paper depends on the length of the cellulose fibres and their freedom from impurities; it does not indeed matter very much what the raw material is from which the paper pulp is made. The lasting quality of the paper is also affected by acidity which may be imparted among other things by the sizing material. The ink used in making records is also important in determining the longevity of the record. Certain kinds of ink tend to fade, the writing disappearing completely after a length of time. Other inks due to their acid qualities eat into the paper and destroy it. An ink in an alkaline medium containing a permanent pigment is what is required. Carbon and pencil copies do not fade by themselves, but with use become smudged or faint.

So much about the most common record materials. How to retard their natural decay with age or, in other words, how to preserve them from the effects of light, heat, humidity, dust, fungi and vermin? It is common experience that paper exposed to excessive light becomes discoloured. In India (perhaps also elsewhere) one of the popular modes of fighting fungi and insects in books is to expose the affected books and papers to the sun for a whole day or two. This may be effective against the vermin, but it also ruins the paper which thus exposed becomes discoloured and brittle. The remedy is as dangerous as the ailment. The ultra-violet rays in sunlight or artificial lights are highly injurious to the cellulose fibres in the paper which must be protected against exposure to such rays. So far as light is concerned, ideal conditions for paper preservation would be provided by a completely windowless room lighted by low power bulbs only when necessary. But there are other considerations, as we shall see, which may not make this practicable. Plain glass does not cut off the injurious rays of light; therefore care should be taken that direct sunlight even through glass panes does not fall on the records in the room where they are kept. The windows may be draped with heavy curtains which will cut off light or diffuse it. Yellow panes help in keeping out some of the injurious rays. Or, the records may be kept in closed containers.

Next to light comes heat. Excessive heat has the effect of making the paper brittle, which will crumble into dust after some time. Excessive variation in temperature has an equally deleterious effect on paper. It results in the cellulose fibres expanding and contracting over and over again, thus weakening them. Equally important is the relative humidity of the air in the stack rooms. Too little humidity tends to dry the cellulose fibres and rob them of their resilience, while too much humidity encourages the growth of mould. In India we are all familiar with the fungus growth on all articles including books and paper during the rainy season. The fact is that the air around

us has all the time fungus spores floating in it, and when the humidity of the air goes above a certain point, these spores settle down on objects and the mould grows. Often it will be noticed that old books or papers have an ugly brown patch which is called "foxing" and results from a localized deposit of iron rust from a particular kind of fungus.

Experiments have shown that a temperature between 65° F and 75° F is the best for the health of paper. Fortunately, this temperature is also comfortable for human beings. As to humidity, a moisture content of below 30 per cent in the air tends to cause too much dryness, while above 75 per cent, even for a short time, it encourages the growth of mould. It is obvious that relative humidity of the air in the stack room should be somewhere between 30 and 75 per cent, say 50 per cent. The conditions of temperature and humidity, viz. 65°—75° and 50 per cent, should be maintained constantly, twenty-four hours in the day all the year round. In India there is hardly a place where such optimum conditions can be met with normally. The obvious conclusion is that resort has to be had to air-conditioning by which means alone these conditions can be ensured.

Air-conditioning has other advantages besides maintaining the required temperature and relative humidity in the stack area. It helps in neutralizing the effects of atmospheric gases and keeping out dust. The most common atmospheric gas which we have to contend against is sulphur dioxide which is produced by the combustion of coal and oil and is usually abundant in the air particularly in cities and industrial areas. The concentration of sulphur dioxide in air varies from time to time and from place to place, but even in dilutions of 0.5 to 1 part per million part of air it is readily absorbed by paper fibres. The gas then combines with the oxygen and moisture of the air and forms sulphuric acid which affects the cellulose fibres and finally breaks the fibrous structure of the paper. With time the amount of sulphuric acid in the

paper increases and its effect is accelerated. Therefore, freeing the air from the sulphur dioxide is an essential for the preservation of records. If the record repository is air-conditioned, free supply of outer air in it can be entirely cut off and the air that is pumped in can be passed through the spray chamber of the air-conditioning system where the chilled water used for controlling moisture and treated with an alkaline solution (usually soda ash, potassium dichromate and sodium silicate) can effectively oxidize the fresh air and remove the sulphur dioxide from it. This alkaline wash will also remove a large proportion of the dust in the incoming air.

The effect of dust on paper is not merely to make it dirty or be a source of discomfort to the user. The tiny but hard and sharp particles of silica contained in dust rub against the paper while handling or even when there is a draught of air and cause abrasions in the paper fibre. Unfortunately the washing of air mentioned above does not eliminate all the dust particles in the air. Consequently, careful dusting has to be made of the records from time to time. Cleaning with a duster can take inordinately long time, besides being a little risky as damage to the paper may be caused by friction. Air cleaners have been used in large record repositories with good results.

So far we have dealt with the means to be adopted in order to maintain records in good condition by the control of light, temperature and humidity, and by eliminating dust and atmospheric gases. If the records are on good material, in a good state of preservation and un-affected by fungi and insects, then given the conditions and not mishandled, they should keep for an indefinite length of time. But one often notices that in the absence of those optimum conditions the old records intended to be preserved are already affected by fungi or insects, the papers torn, the ink fading, the paper weakened and breaking at the folds or edges, the papers smudged and stained, the seals breaking, and a hundred other things which unless

set right may lead to the total destruction of the records. Since this is not a manual on the preservation of records, I shall not go into the details of all the processes that have been devised to counteract the various affections. It will suffice to say that effective counter measures for all of them have been found.

As to moulds and insects, the only safe and effective way is fumigation. When dealing with records (it should always be remembered that records are unique things and once a piece is lost, there is no means of replacing it) care has to be taken to employ only such means of rehabilitation as would not adversely affect the record materials. Exposure to sun or interleaving with *neem* leaves, tobacco leaves, dried red chillies or even slough of snakes are some of the popular remedies against fungi and insects. Some place their faith on some DDT preparation or other commerical insecticide. Some of these nostrums are but partially effective, some not at all. Even when effective to a certain extent, the remedy such as exposure to sun, may prove more harmful than the malady inasmuch as it might weaken the paper or fade the ink beyond measure. The use of certain tried fumigants alone should be permissible which are effective without affecting the strength of the paper or the legibility of the writing. Such fumigation is provided, among others, by thymol paradichlorobenzene, carbon tetrachloride and a mixture of carbon dioxide and ethelyne oxide. Some of these fumigants are toxic to human beings and all care should be taken to employ them only in air-tight chambers. Then there is another problem—exposure to the fumigants may kill the insects which the fumes reach; but how to ensure that the fumes penetrate into every chink and hole? Then what about the eggs which are not affected by the fumes? Experiments have proved that vacuum fumigation is the only effective means to take care of all these problems. The process is to stuff an air-tight chamber with the records to be treated and draw out the air creating a vacuum inside. The absence of pressure in the chamber makes the

eggs burst. The fumigant is then introduced into the chamber which kills all living organisms in a specific time after which the gas is drawn out and fresh air reintroduced. Then the records are completely disinfected and can be transferred to the stacks which should themselves be kept free from infestation. In order to keep the stacks free from infestation certain definite measures can be taken. In the first place, the whole place should be fumigated and cleaned. After that it should be seen that no affected material comes into it. As a safety measure all new accessions should be fumigated before being introduced into the stacks. Watch should be kept so that there is no termite invasion. Termites can arise out of cracks in the floor. Once a termite invasion is noticed—there is always the tell-tale earthen tunnel—the queen ant must be traced and killed, all tunnels broken and the insects killed. Some repellents should always be kept on the shelves, like pyrethrum, sodium fluoride, soda and starch mixture or naphthaline bricks. It should also be remembered that some repellents are also toxic to human beings and necessary precautions should be taken when employing them.

Having cleaned and disinfected the records, and after having made sure that they are provided with the most satisfactory housing conditions, the next thing to do is to go into the details of physical damage already sustained. If the paper is stained, it has to be cleaned; if torn, it has to be repaired; if weakened, it must be reinforced; and finally, if loose papers lend themselves to binding, they should be bound up into volumes, otherwise placed into carton boxes before being finally stacked.

Again since this is not a manual on the preservation of records, I shall not go into the details of all the processes of rehabilitation of records. All I need say is that there are different processes to answer different needs. In short, flattening, washing and removal of stains, treatment of faded inks, reinforcing paper by glazing, sizing, mounting, inlaying, half margin repair, application of chiffon or Japanese tissue paper, lamination with transparent sheeting

with or without adhesive and binding are all works of skill and can be performed well only after an intensive study of the processes and long practice. Not only that, a good deal of discretion has to be used in deciding which of the processes to apply in a particular case. Furthermore, special processes have been devised for repairing special materials like maps, charts, blue-prints, photographic films and photoprints, sound recordings, seals, water or oil-soaked or charred records and records on parchment or palm leaf or birch bark. Some of the processes are comparatively simple and inexpensive, some involve the employment of machinery worth thousands of rupees, but all calling for specialized training and practice.

So much about non-human enemies of records. Human beings can be as much responsible for the destruction of records as the elements or insects. I am not only referring to mishandling or careless handling the effects of which are obvious. There are cases of bad appraisal. It is evident that every scrap of paper produced or received in an office cannot be kept for ever—they are not sufficiently valuable to merit expenditure of money or energy for their preservation; by being retained they only occupy valuable space and obscure the more valuable materials. So at some stage a selection has to be made of the records that can be destroyed without doing any harm to either administration or scholarship. Bad appraisal has often led to the valuable record being thrown away and the valueless kept. Then there are people who may use the information contained in records to the detriment of Government or of individuals. Again there are others who may wish to tamper with the records in order to destroy or distort evidence. There are some who are either collectors of autographs and seals or are mere kleptomaniacs, and it is a problem to guard the records against them. Finally, there are incendiarism and bombing, results of man-made war or revolution, which can cause total destruction of records. Providing security against so many possible enemies of records is a big problem, and the selection of the

place where records are to be kept the designing of building and its site, special construction with a view to affording maximum security are some of the considerations which go towards solving that problem.

It will be obvious from the preceding paragraphs that the problem of the preservation of records is a major and complex one, and that its solution requires expensive equipment and specially trained personnel. It is doubtful whether any government can afford to equip every individual department and office adequately for this purpose. Even were it able to do so, it would lead to much duplication of work and wastage. From the point of view of preservation and security alone it would be both economical and more efficient to concentrate all valuable records of the government, no matter to which agency they belong, in one central repository, specially constructed, air-conditioned and adequately equipped with machinery and trained personnel.

---

---

PRINTED IN INDIA BY THE MANAGER GOVT. OF INDIA PRESS,  
FARIDABAD, 1961

---

---