

Archives of the Nation in Making: Public Institutions in the 19th Century and the Beginning of Modern Alternative Archives within a Contemporary Institutional Framework

Abhijit Bhattacharya

Documentation Officer, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta

1. Print-publication and the modernisation project in Bengal

In 1851, in his office at the Asiatic Society, the Librarian and Assistant Secretary of the Society, Rajendralal Mitra (1823/4 – 1891) received an award notification from the Vernacular Literature Committee for promoting modern knowledge in the vernacular. Rajendralal, a versatile genius known for his archaeological investigation in the state of Orissa, a member of the committee on scientific terminology and a passionate librarian, started publishing a monthly periodical called *Bibidhārtha samgraha* with the aid of Rs. 80 per month, in that same year. It was to continue for ten years and then again start publishing under a different title but with the same flavour. Combining both periodicals, *Rahasya sandarbha* created a unique gamut of knowledge in the popular sphere and went on for about twenty-five years.

In the first issue of *Bibidhārtha samgraha*, the editor declared it a monthly dedicated to “geology, history, zoology, art and literature”, as well as anthropology. So, in a word, it encompassed the emerging European disciplines in the colony six years before the establishment of Calcutta University (1857), and within three decades of the first formal college for civilians in the colony, the Hindoo College (1817). In the introduction of the first issue, Rajendralal noted down the following editorial statement:

There is a great chance that the experts will be displeased with our way of writing, but I trust that they will keep in mind the purpose of the periodical and forgive us. To grant the common people easy access to knowledge, and let the trader and the shopkeeper learn about the world in the little time [left by] the pursuit of their professions; to enable the girls and boys to extend their knowledge as they read this periodical as part of their games or even as a book of stories; to make the youth put aside sensually exciting books and take interest in useful things; and to enable the aged to engage in serene discussion of good things, we have tried to create a periodical that will fulfil these aims, and we take the fulfilment of this aim as our bounden duty. The learned wise ones can easily understand colloquial and impure mixed language, but pure language, that is, sādhu bhāsā, and any deep-meaning precepts imparted in it, will be difficult for untutored people to grasp. Hence, the adequate clothing of

language for this periodical is the adulterated colloquial language that is used in conversation in civilised society.¹

Bibidhārtha samgraha initiated a campaign for promoting modern European disciplines of studies in vernacular and beyond the boundary of formal academic institutions in a time when European anthropologists were engaged in anthropological survey to identify “criminal tribes” and to investigate “aboriginals” with the help of the state and its army (the Indian police act of 1862 was yet to be framed then). At that time, demographic studies were yet to be known, European anthropology was an unexplored area in India, and archaeology was still a sketchy idea. Academic disciplines in Hindoo College were limited to courses in English language and literature, classical languages, mathematics and philosophy. And the first Medical College for graduate students had just opened its office for admission. All sources suggest that the periodical was a grand success for popularising modern disciplines among the common.

2. Printing, publication and the possibility of archives

Printing in Bengali language in Bengal started in 1778 from a workshop at the Srirampur Baptist Mission Press, with the pioneering effort of two ironsmith cousins, Panchanan and Manohar Karmakar, under the leadership of Charles Wilkins. The Karmakars cast the first metal type-set of several Indian languages, including Bengali, at the Baptist Mission press under Danish control. That ushered in the era of printing in Bengali as well as in several other Indian languages.² But Bengali publication on a large scale had to wait until 1800 when Fort William College needed books in Bengali as teaching material for newly arrived East India Company officials from England, and for the Srirampur Baptist Mission’s mission to spread Christianity in local languages. A conservative estimate shows that between 1801 and 1832, 212,000 copies of books in forty languages were published from the Srirampur Mission. In 1817, the Calcutta School Society was set up to publish books in English and Indian languages. The School Book Society was established one year later in 1818, and in the following years, English and vernacular schools were established throughout the country. These were under the control of the government, the missionaries, or part of native initiatives such as especially the Brahma Samaj from the 1830s onwards, and there was a steady increase in the number of these schools each year. Also in 1818, the first Bengali monthly periodical *Digdarśan*, edited by John Marshman, started publishing from the Srirampur Baptist Mission, and only a year later appeared the first Bengali weekly, *Samācār Darpaṇ*. On a very rough estimate, 2,080 periodical titles came out between 1818 and 1930.

¹ *Bibidhārtha samgraha* (Vol. 1; issue: I), translation from Pradip Kumar Basu (ed.), *Health and Society in Bengal: A Selection from Late 19th Century Bengali Periodicals*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Emphasis mine.

² The history of early printing presses in Bengal is extensively discussed in Graham Shaw’s *Printing in Bengal to 1800*. Also see Tapti Ray, ‘Disciplining the Printed Text: Colonial and Nationalist Surveillance of Bengali Literature’, in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 69-71.

The shape that the print industry took in different regions of India varied due to the different nature of local printing. In Madras presidency, European missionaries dominated the industry for a considerable period; in the Western Provinces it was mostly the Government and the missionaries. But in Bengal presidency, printing in European languages started under the control of the East India Company. Vernacular print came out of the missionary fold, but the ownership of vernacular printing presses transferred fast to the natives. If we consider 1818, with publication of *Digdarśan*, as the earmark of Bengali printing for mass consumption, then it was within the short span of four years that Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay established his own printing press in Kolutola, in the northern part of Calcutta, and started the publication of another bi-weekly news magazine, *Samācār Candrikā* (from 1822). The “Candrikā Yantra” or Candrikā Printing Press is known as the first printing press owned by a native outside the missionary or East India Company fold. By the 1830s, hundreds of printing presses owned by natives had started publishing vernacular literature to express the opinions of different smaller groups among the newly emerged Bengali intelligentsia, covering almost all social, political and religious issues. We can consider the involvement and formation of intellectuals in Bengal during this period as a direct fall-out of the permanent settlement in Bengal; however, this is another historical issue beyond the scope of the present discussion.

The purpose of this article is not to present yet another Bengal-centric version of modern Indian cultural history; I treat Bengal just as a case to develop an understanding of a pan-Indian archival project. The print and publication industry played a crucial role in the formation of civil society both in Madras and in Bengal presidencies as also in other parts of India.

The print industry produced knowledge in almost every field of modern studies, popularised knowledge, and sparked debate on contemporary issues such as the Hindu orthodoxy’s rejection of widow remarriage or the debate on female literacy. In 1857, the huge Bengali print industry remained almost silent on the “Mutiny”, while the Urdu and Hindi print media argued in favour of the mutineers, and some of the literature suggested to view the “Mutiny” as armed struggle for independence. Here, the ‘politics of silence’ is interesting. The voice of Reverend Lalbehari De, in his monthly *Arunoday*, criticised the mutineers for destabilising order, and there was no criticism in the other publications of the time. Concerns regarding economic liberalisation, then without endorsement of the Indian National Congress, as a “necessary pre-condition for political independence”³ can be observed in publications well ahead of the nationalist movement of 1905. Such cross-currents of the society and politics of modern Bengal can only be read from that body of knowledge produced by the civil society and not housed in the government archives of any state or country.

On the 31st of January, 1874, *Basantak* came into being, a periodical edited by Pranānath Datta (1840-1888) which gained the honour of being the first Bengali

³ *Mahājanbandhu* is one interesting publication started in 1901. Sugar merchants of Calcutta published the periodical for promoting indigenous technology for agro-industrial products to market in India as an alternative of imported agro-industrial products.

cartoon magazine. Pranath, a close associate of Rajendralal Mitra, had helped the latter in editing the second run of the nicely illustrated magazine *Rahasya Sandarbha* after the publication of its predecessor *Bibidhārtha Saṃgraha* had ceased. The reason for this was a review of Dinabandhu Mitra's controversial play *Nīl'darpaṇ* on the state of indigo farming labourers by Kaliprasanna Singha, known as a self-styled dandy in the field of Bengali literature. *Bibidhārtha Saṃgraha* received a grant for publication from the Vernacular Literature Committee, a Government body. Rajendralal sensed the threat of incurring censure for publishing the review of a proscribed play. Thus he immediately removed Kaliprasanna Singha from the committee and renamed the magazine as *Rahasya Sandarbha*. The reason is clear: being a scholar of high merit, Rajendralal wanted to maintain a non-interventionist stand in the domain of knowledge and avoid at all cost a controversy with the government. Pranath had joined the publication committee of the *Sandarbha* and edited the 1872 issue of the periodical. His association with one leading illustrated magazine helped him to design another magazine with cartoon illustration.

Pranath Dutta started publishing *Basantak* with a specific agenda. He was a member of a movement for the new Calcutta Municipal Corporation Bill that prescribed the inclusion of natives in the governing body of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. So Pranath's periodical, carrying his own illustrations and being printed in a press owned by himself, caricatured the "failure" to implement regular tasks by the Municipal Corporation, and highlighted local self-governance. While the illustrations may differ from the accompanying text, lines are not fine, and critics may observe similarities with cartoon illustrations in European magazines, still everyone has to honour Pranath as pioneer of cartoon and caricature publication in the then Bengal presidency. In 1876, the European members in the body of the corporation accepted the demand and Pranath Dutta became the first elected native member of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Its agenda fulfilled, *Basantak* disappeared.

1880s witnessed scores of periodical publication and thousands of books on medicine, public health and hygiene with special emphasis on indigenous medicine. Some of these were platforms of debate between *Āyurveda*, modern European system of medicine, Homeopathy and *Yunānī*; others were rather scholarly medical journals in Bengali language published by physicians of Medical College, like *Bhīṣak Darpaṇ* (1892 – 1914)⁴. While the issue of modern academic discipline and contesting the discipline continued, Bengal never saw any similar vernacular publication wave from the third decade of the 20th century.

Print is addictive; print multiplies manuscripts, allows better access and visibility. So print never limited itself within the publication of texts only. There were images, both embedded within text and as an independent form. *Bibidhārtha Saṃgraha* used to import blocks from Europe, and *Basantak* used their own wood-cut blocks to print illustrations. At the same time, in parallelity to the popular art market in Calcutta, "Kālīghāṭ Paṭacitra" artists started depending on lithograph printing for a much

⁴ First four volumes edited by Jahiruddin Ahmed, a senior surgeon of the Calcutta Medical College.

wider circulation of their works. From this eventually emerged Battala wood-engraving as a popular art form in the 1870s, and gradually diversified in to the finer forms of calendar art, European-style oleographs, etc. The Government College of Arts and Craft in Calcutta opened its door for aspirant artists to provide training in European forms of art in 1876. Talent got associated with indigenous skill to create different artistic practices. In 1905, U. Ray and Sons used the latest technology in their family-owned print run to start modern-style illustrations. They were among the first generation of Indian-owned large industrial standard printing firms. Besides the improving techniques for printing illustrations, the same group of artists also kept themselves busy in publishing popular books and journals dedicated to the teaching of printing techniques such as linocut, halftone print process, chromolithograph etc. These efforts further contributed to the databank of knowledge on history and society in colonial eastern India.

3. Public institutions in 19th century Bengal: towards modern archives

The printing press as such, and particularly vernacular printing, combined with the factor of native ownership to open an avenue for sharing opinion on different issues among educated people. The process produced a huge body of knowledge, and in present days that entire body of knowledge may be envisaged as a databank for investigating colonial Bengal and other eastern Indian provinces, as well as the process of modernization then underway in them. Even in the contemporary scene, that entire body required responsible hands for safe-keeping and safe-guarding. For this task, Calcutta Public Library (established in 1836, and variously renamed first as the Imperial Library and then as the National Library of post-colonial India) alone was not sufficient, especially since this library was operating as an interventionist agency in that it was the depository library of native and European publications.

Rajendralal Mitra realised the importance of multiple agencies under native control to house and disseminate the body of knowledge indigenously produced and published an article on this topic in a 1852 issue of his popular magazine *Bibidhārtha samgraha*.⁵ By way of coincidence, a group of people in the district of Jessore (presently in Bangladesh) simultaneously established an institute of learning and exchange of thoughts which was also to house contemporary publications, thus marking the beginning of public institutions in Bengal. From 1856 onwards, several similar public institutions started operating in Calcutta and neighbouring districts. With the patronage of Jaykrishna Mukherjee, the zamindar of Uttarpara, a library for the public was established in 1856 on a piece of land gifted by him to the “people of Uttarpara” along with a collection of 3,000 books. During the same time elderly citizens of another settlement just six kilometres west of Uttarpara established the Konnagar Public Library, another public institution library meant for the “intellectual exercise and moral development of local youths”. The public library in the then French colony of Chandannagar (Chandernagore) is another important Hooghly district library established in the same year. The single largest holding of Bengali books and periodicals, the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat (Baṅgīya Sāhitya

⁵ “Granthāgār”, in *Bibidhārtha Samgraha*, 1852.

Pariṣat), was established in 1894. By 1905, and due to the involvement of senior intellectuals and nationalist leaders, the Parishat became a vibrant hub of promoting Bengali literature and culture, and started spreading out in different parts of Bengal and Assam.

In order to start a parallel instruction system in the vernacular for technical education, the National Council of Education, Bengal, was established in 1905 as an alternative of Bengal Engineering College, where most of the faculty members were Europeans. Jadavpur University of present day emerged from that institution. In the district of Manbhum (then in Bihar, but in later, post-independence days merged with West Bengal), a group of Gandhian leaders formed a society promoting vocational training for the local tribal community. Another institution called Shilpashram emerged in 1924 and started publishing *Mukti*, a weekly Bengali-language periodical to promote Gandhian thought and vocational training. The institute and their organ were proscribed by law several times, even in post-colonial India. Eventually in 1942, the entire group joined the Congress Socialist Party and engaged in armed struggle against the colonial Government and against their old ideology, the shift being reflected in the pages of their organ *Mukti*. During post-independence when the Government of India and West Bengal Government decided the merger of Manbhum district in Bihar with West Bengal on the basis of linguistic identity, the group protested and once more faced a ban on the society and the publication. Like other public institutions, their archive is still housed in their own premises: the age-old mud house still stores the entire archive of *Mukti* in a paper-pulp state.

All these public institutions started functioning with their own specific agenda, and all these agendas were independent and quite different, as is the rule in a pluralist society, but combined all of these institutions contributed to a larger databank of historical sources. The list of public institutions established in between 1856 and 1912 in present West Bengal and Assam of India and Bangladesh seems to be endless, and almost all institutions survived the span of time with smaller or larger collections, which collectively would constitute the databank of social and cultural history of Eastern India.

4. The present

As mentioned in the last section, public institutions emerged with the patronage of certain people and groups. During the nationalist movement of 1905, most of the existing institutions turned to hubs of promoting nationalist thought, and were joined by several newly emerging institutions. The wave of nationalism subsided by 1912 with the settlement of the new states of Assam and Eastern Bengal. During the post colonial period, the vibrant public institutions that had been a space of much intellectual exercise during the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, eventually turned to ordinary cash-strapped libraries with huge collections of printed documents produced by the civil society in colonial Bengal. They largely started to depend on government grants for maintenance of the “collections”, and the grants were either not available or inadequate. So it happened that the huge body of

knowledge archives of the nation just barely survived as public libraries, and no more as public institutions. The present state is not at all unanticipated, as in a developing state, the state budget for education and research has always been undermined.

Until the 1960s, then, historians were largely dependent on government archives. Hardly any academic agenda was framed to assure the survival of that other type of archive – the libraries and collections dealt with above– which I prefer to label “alternative archives”. From the 1970s, a group of historians that later became known as the Subaltern Studies collective started exploring alternative sources for investigating social and cultural elements of the then nascent democratic state of India, as in their opinion the dominant trend of history writing was only looking at the political system of the state and ignored the existence of civil society. That effort suggested a change in practice of writing history of present South Asia and opened an avenue for alternative archives. Being an outsider to the domain of historians, I am not in a position to comment on any of these practices, but all I can say from the observations of an archivist (even though the demarcation line between historians and archivists often turns thin) that the new trend demanded alternative archives.

India has its National Library and National Archives, but there is a basic problem lying in the idea of a single national archive to accommodate the intellectual property of a pluralist society. Again, the government archives are an organic entity in the sense that the nature of documents depends on the flow of document deposits from various administrative and judicial departments of the government. The state is interventionist by definition, and so are government archives. But historical documents produced by the civil society do not need any intervention, so archives for historians require an alternative agency to preserve and disseminate the databank of the state and the civil society. Most of the state archives prefer to ignore the existence of the large body of knowledge produced by the civil society, although these archives are not parallel but complimentary to each other. So the necessity of alternative archives was strongly felt by a large group of academicians in India since the trend in historical studies changed. This eventually led to the creation of institutional archives of the nation.

From the 1990s on, some academic institutions have spelt out their own agenda on archive. Unlike government archives, these are usually an outcome of rigorous academic exercise and planning. In 1993, the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, an ICSSR research institute in social sciences, started working on retrieval of rare texts and visual materials in tangible medium from old public institutions. The Centre for Studies in Culture and Society, Bangalore, started working on an archive of contemporary Indian politics and media. Recently, the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, is engaged in gathering contemporary popular literature which they have started to transfer to a safe archive. Moreover, they have also created an archive of literature published in an endangered language of the Kachhar valley region, and transferred North Indian classical music pressed on 72 RPM records from the 1920s to digital format for better access. The NRTT-MediaLab programme on the future of celluloid, equally housed at Jadavpur

University, is working at a databank of Indian cinema in order to preserve and provide access to Indian cinema in electronic medium. The Delhi-based CSDS – SARAI programme have already established themselves as a leading institution in archiving and researching on contemporary media. In Chennai, the Roja Muthiah Research Library started as a service library with initial assistance of the University of Chicago and is gradually transforming itself into a research centre with the largest extant archive of printed Tamil literature of the 19th and 20th centuries and of contemporary visual culture.

All these institutions have their own programmes, but on their basis there is a single aim, namely to contribute to the knowledge bank in the form of institutional archives. Some institutions, like the CSSSC, are well focused on retrieving endangered documents produced in colonial India from old cash strapped archives, and other institutions, like SARAI and CSCS, are engaged in providing access and long-term visibility of social, political and media-related issues of post-colonial India. Both trends keep contributing to the preservation of the collective memory of modern India.

Recently, these institutional archives have started to come closer to each other and are trying to collaborate in a consortium framework. Some have also started to think of expanding the horizon and to encompass all kinds of archives together. So in sum, it can be stated that a small group of historians and archivists are engaged in mapping institutional archival resources with the ambitious aim to create a consortium for free exchange of archival resources.⁶ This may sound too ambitious, but given the recent development of institutional archives in just fifteen years, we can say at least that this is not impossible.

⁶ <http://publicarchives.wordpress.com>