

Archivist Chronicles

In an exclusive interview with archivist Biswadeep Chakraborty, **Abhijit Bhattacharya** shares his journey in archiving, the challenges faced, and highlights impactful projects preserving the visual history of Bengal. Abhijit Bhattacharya is Documentation Officer at the CSSSC (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta) and an archivist recognised for his significant contributions to the field. He received a 2015 World Summit Award nomination from India for his work in Culture and Tourism, specifically related to the EAP341 project. In 2014, the Digital Empowerment Foundation honored him with The Manthan Award in Culture, Heritage, and Tourism for his ICT practices, particularly in the development and promotion of e-Culture through the EAP341 Project.

Biswadeep Chakraborty: What excites you the most about your role as an archivist? Is it the experience of working with collections from the 90s until now, and what is the passion for archiving or documentation that has kept you going over the years?

Abhijit Bhattacharya: It's a long story. Perhaps, I am one of the very few archivists globally who has started working without any formal training. I do not have any formal training, but I have had some brief orientations in some places. It all started in 1993 when I finished my Masters in Comparative Literature. At that point in time, I was just a part-time volunteer at the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University. Jasodhara Bagchi and Abhijit Sen were my early mentors, and I was helping at the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University with their women's writing publication series. Around September or October 1993, Indira Chowdhury, my other Guru, asked me if I was interested in working at CSSSC as a Research Assistant to Partha Chatterjee. It was a big opportunity. Partha Chatterjee looked at my half-page CV, which I got typed from a typist at Jadavpur 8b. He said, "Well, this kind of work is not impressive, but as I am going abroad and Indira is joining Jadavpur University as Reader of English, you will have to carry on the work that Indira was doing in the past six months." That was my six months assignment and the beginning.

My task was easy. Actually, I was looking for materials for Bangiya Sahitya Parishat. Here is an important thing people often mistake – whether the CSSSC Archive has been generated from the CSSSC itself. The answer is no. Being an institution of 1973, we have a library with current publications, and we never had any kind of serious items to archive. Right from the beginning, the project came out of unofficial discussions between Hitesranjan Sanyal and Partha Chatterjee way back in the 1970s. They felt a kind of absence from the Archive of the Civil Society. We have government archives at national and state levels – which are the custodians of political, administrative, and judicial documents. It's an automated and organic process. Some files are departmentalised, then once expired are moved to the jurisdiction of the archive.

Since the emergence of print in the late 18th century, the civil society of East and South, especially, started producing a huge amount of printed documents like newspapers, periodicals, study books, regional history, etc. They were important resources but difficult to trace anywhere. That was our beginning, and to date how we work is that we contact public institutions or private collectors. Our area of work has largely been within Bengal and Assam. More recently, we are planning to work on some Dalit literature in Maharashtra and Karnataka, which are still in the early planning stage. Our process involves looking at some institutions that have serious materials to archive like regional history books, pre-colonial pedagogy related manuscripts, etc. We contact them and we convince them, which I feel is the most important task. Usually, the custodians hesitate to hand over their collections to some unknown entity. But the change has happened in the last thirty years; today we get regular phone calls from collectors, custodians, and institutions to work with their collections. The situation differed significantly in the early 1990s and 2000s. During that period, we faced heightened resistance, necessitating us to secure access through methods such as referencing influential connections, making promises, and the like, as opposed to relying on credibility alone. It's really good that our venture in open access archiving in collaboration with the University of Heidelberg since 2009 changed the perception of our institution to most custodians and collectors. Now, people are mostly willing to let us in and browse their collection, digitise their collection, create metadata and upload it for open access. This is really a big achievement. We have somehow successfully managed to create a trend or culture of open access. How many other institutions are working in this area? They could have done their task much better, and their archival collections have endless possibilities. But what disappointed me is that they do not have a good dissemination policy. They just get into some collection, digitise them and put in folders, and that makes no sense.

Biswadeep Chakraborty: In terms of sharing and availability, what strategies do you employ to enhance the accessibility of your archival collection for the audience and to promote awareness of the archive's resources and services?

Abhijit Bhattacharya: We hardly have any original documents; mostly, we have all copies. In 1993, we began with microfilm when the term digitisation was actually not known. Those were the early days when we were microfilming, but the problem with microfilm is that preservation is very expensive, and dissemination, which is critical, is expensive too. Every time we have to put the microfilm to the direct copy admission. In 1993, copying 100 ft. roll cost us around Rs 1,103. Around 2005 onwards, we started using a hybrid model, that is at the same time microfilming and digitising, but then our instruments were very dated, actually, they were discards of other institutions. In 2007, while we were working on a collection discarded by Rabindra Bharati University's Library, we had to wait for three months to get raw stocks of microfilms arriving from Singapore. Then I decided, it's enough for microfilming. Because by that time microfilming had become obsolete. There were very few firms then engaged with microfilming in the country. In contrast, in the 1970s-80s-90s there were numerous firms in India providing microfilming

services. But with a change in technology, they closed their businesses. We were reluctant to switch to a new system because that was expensive, and you know our finances have never been that good. For each and every step of archiving, we have to depend on external funding. Meanwhile, we got a huge collection of Amrita Bazar Patrika and Jugantar Patrika from the office of Amrita Bazar and those were lying idle in our possession. Though I asked our librarian not to allow anyone to touch them, scholars often requested to consult those papers. In this process, in about four or five years of manhandling, they got more brittle and degenerated. In 2009, we applied for the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) of the British Library and that helped us to get our first overhead scanner. That was our first step into digitisation and by that time the Centre for Research Library, Chicago helped us digitise our entire collection of microfilms. Now we have got everything on our digitised platform. By that time, we also had a collaboration with the University of Heidelberg. The problem we faced was in terms of funds, as we couldn't afford to maintain a 200 Terabyte online server or buy that much domain on Google or any cloud-based servers. Right from the beginning we worked in collaboration with multiple institutions. In 1994 we were already connected to the British Library and University of Chicago. I worked with Jim/James Nye of the University of Chicago and Graham Shaw, and they helped develop our archive in various ways. The University of Heidelberg uploaded some of our content on their portal. That was our first dissemination. More recently, we have collaborated with a program called South Asia Materials Project (SAMP). It's a program of the Centre for Research Library, Chicago with a supporting program called South Asia Open Archives. We were also engaged with SOAS from 2016. Now we are in some kind of decision-making position in terms of dissemination. SOAS has an agreement with Ithaca for which we have got access to JSTOR, and according to the Memorandum of Understanding between SOAS and Ithaca — JSTOR provided us an interface called JSTOR Open Access. For which you do not need to subscribe or need any login credentials. Our medium-term plan is to upload our entire content in phases on JSTOR. Their curation, visibility, and metadata structure is much better.

Biswadeep Chakraborty: What kind of challenges or dilemmas do you see as an archivist that affects the integrity of Archives on selecting or discarding materials?

Abhijit Bhattacharya: This is a question I have faced several times. Some have alleged about my ruthless behavior, about the selection, but actually the hard truth is that the resources or funds are limited. For example, assume that right now I am working on two funding applications. If they are successful, then we will get \$50,000 from one and \$30,000 from the other one, and I have to do everything within that budget. And now, if I entered a public library, who has already collaborated with us and allowed access to the library for digitisation. If the same library has 5000 books, they are non-copyrighted. The first thing is the copyright question. I don't know whether it is scientific or not, but the first thing we check is, we largely do not count on materials that started publishing after 1957, the dissemination year of Copyright Law in India. Second thing is also the copyright expression, the time is 60 years. But if you strictly go by the

Copyright expression, it is really difficult to include almost all twentieth-century materials to any online portals. We check some other things as well, whether the publication is discontinued or is there any established ownership of that collection or publication or whether the publication is re-registered under the new Indian Patent and Copyright Law of 1957. If all answers are No, we prioritise this and then the second priority comes, where we check each title on OCLC and British Library catalogue. If we found any instance of a title in OCLC or British Library catalogued data, then we discard it. We start prioritising by subject, like we give priority to regional history, we prioritise on the caste question, poetry books, novels and if these are not otherwise academically very important, then we discard them. Say now I started to do the collection of five thousand books, now following this process, I arrived at a figure of say one thousand. Now, I have to check whether my budget and my timeline will permit me to do this. If my answer is Yes, we will try to digitise the entire one thousand collections; if not, then we have to actually rethink, restructure or slot the things for the second phase and sometimes that never happens.

Biswadeep Chakraborty: What are some interesting works that have come out of using the material in your collection?

Abhijit Bhattacharya: An honest answer will be so lengthy that you will have to mark it as - to be continued! There are so many scholars internationally who started working on our collections from 1995-96 onwards. I prefer not to answer this question with serious academic work. I would just mention a few works created from the CSSSC office by my colleagues across the time. The first venture was an ambitious project of transferring a part of our archive from microfilm to print and that eventually produced a book in two volumes called *Samuik* in Bangla. These are the selection of essays published in periodicals from 1818 till 1920s. They were thematically divided and published by Ananda and then we got an English translation of a much shorter selection published by Sage. Now second, we have curated our first exhibition from this archive in 2002 at the Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre, titled *The Visual Worlds of Modern Bengal*. That exhibition I think was a very successful dissemination and we conceptualized it into two parts: first part covered paintings, lithographs, oleographs and the second part was photographs only. Over one month we got a huge response. Then we mounted another exhibition in 2007, it was [Gautam Bhadra's CSSSC project](#) and IFA played a huge part in it. The India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) funded a part of our advertisement and commercial archive project and we mounted the exhibition in collaboration with Tea Board India, and Gautam Bhadra wrote a very good descriptive catalog of Tea promotion related material which eventually got published. This was another project.

Concluding Note:

As the insightful interview concludes, it is evident that Abhijit Bhattacharya's remarkable journey at CSSSC Archives has significantly contributed to preserving India's rich visual history. His pioneering efforts in open-access archiving, coupled with collaborations with institutions like the University of Heidelberg and programs such as the South Asia Material Project (SAMP), have not only made the archive more accessible but also set a trend in the culture of open access. Through strategic digitisation and partnerships, CSSSC Archives continues to disseminate valuable resources, creating a lasting impact on scholarly endeavors and exhibitions alike. Abhijit Bhattacharya's dedication and innovative approach underscore the crucial role played by CSSSC Archives in safeguarding and sharing cultural heritage for generations to come.