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A NOTE ON THE IMPERIAL RECORD DEPARTMENT

THE Imperial Record Department is the custodian of the Government of India's archives and is responsible for the care, preservation, and superintendence of all official papers belonging to the various agencies of the central government. It is under the administrative control of the Department of Education, Health and Lands and is neither an independent government agency nor a public record office as is the National Archives of Washington. However, like the latter, it is an integral part of the central administration, and is an institution designed to serve government officials as well as the scholarly public in their quest for fresh lights on problems, administrative and historical.

I. *Early History*

The first formal date in the history of the department is May, 1891, when with the sanction of the home government definitive steps were taken by the Government of India for concentrating in one central office all its extant muniments which had till then been lying scattered in the various secretariat offices at Calcutta. The scope of the new office at the start was limited to cataloguing, classification, and arrangement of records and the Government of India made it quite clear in their basic proposal to the Secretary of State that they had no intention of building up an expensive establishment like the Public Record Office of England. The Record Office thus started its career in a very humble way. It was allotted a staff of eight clerks and about half a dozen rooms in the ground floor of the Imperial Secretariat Building at Calcutta. But the office was fortunate in having Mr. (afterwards Sir) George Forrest as its organizer and first officer-in-charge. Forrest had already built up an admirable record office in Bombay and had carried on an extensive survey of the Foreign and

Military Department records at Calcutta. Besides he had published three magnificent volumes of state papers relating to Warren Hastings' administration and had made a careful study of archival practice in England. His first care and attention was directed to reducing into consultable order the vast accumulation of the past and repairing the mischief caused by former indifference and neglect. But he also found time to launch the gigantic scheme of press-listing all records of the East India Company down to 1800, to compile and print three large volumes of state papers dealing with Lord Clive and the early days of the company, and to collect a mass of materials on the Sepoy Mutiny from the Military Department records which were later published in four volumes. It is also to Forrest's initiative that we owe the preservation of the unique collection of correspondence in Oriental languages which now forms one of the proudest possessions of the department. Forrest held office for eight years, but within this short period he had laid the foundations of a full-fledged record office.

Mr. Samuel Charles Hill (1899-1903), who succeeded Forrest and whose subsequent distinguished career in England is another story, zealously continued the tradition created by his illustrious predecessor. He enriched the institution with many new acquisitions, most noteworthy among which are a complete set of the *Calcutta Gazette* dating back to 1786 and a number of old maps of Calcutta relating to the years 1723-1842, and unearthed a mass of new materials which formed the nucleus of his monumental volumes on Bengal during the stirring days of 1756-1757. Among his other important works may be mentioned the *Abstract of Early Records of Foreign Department 1756-1762*, *List of Europeans in the English Factories in Bengal*, and *The Life of Claud Martin*. Not the least among his achievements were the reforms he introduced in the methods of preservation; it was due to him that the department committed itself to the ambitious program of flattening the entire series of its folded records.

The systematic cataloguing of the various classes of records was planned and commenced by the next officer-in-charge, Dr. Charles Robert Wilson, with whom also originated the grand idea of printing in extenso a number of important records. The ill health which cut short his promising career also prevented him from carrying the idea into execution, and his posthumous volumes on Old Fort William in

Bengal, excellent as they are, bear but an inadequate testimony to the extensive research he had done. But his other brilliant scheme, that of calendaring the entire series of Persian records was taken up by his successor, Mr. (later Sir) E. Denison Ross, who formulated the detailed plan for the work and published the first two volumes of the series under his personal supervision. Ross was also responsible for completing the cataloguing work begun under his predecessor and compiling a press list of the Select Committee's records. To Mr. A. F. Scholfield, who succeeded him, belongs the credit of compiling a number of press lists of the Foreign Department's records and preparing an excellent consolidated index to the public series of press lists. But more particularly will he be remembered for the salutary changes he introduced in the method of archives-keeping and treatment of old records. Mention may be made in this connection of the replacement of the old method of mending documents with tracing paper by that of repair with chiffon.

Forrest, Hill, Wilson, Ross, Scholfield—they were the real makers of the present record office. A full account of their achievements, which is likely to fill a volume, is beyond the scope of the present sketch. But it would not be an exaggeration to say that much of the present glory of the institution should be traced to the impetus that these pioneers had given it when they started it on its illustrious career. Time has long gone by when the department was still struggling to overcome the difficulties of its uncertain youth. It is now the biggest, the best equipped, and the best organized record office in India and is playing a much more important and inspiring role in the intellectual life of the country than was conceived by its promoters. In consequence of the sweeping changes which its policy has undergone during the past five years, the department has taken upon itself an ambitious program with the object of making its rich possessions available to the world of scholars and of stimulating among the general public a true archivist sentiment, a warm admiration of the country's past. Thanks to this new policy the department has become not only the center of archival work in the country but a veritable place of pilgrimage for all archivists and workers in modern Indian history.

II. *Resources of the Archives Office*

Before proceeding to describe the present activities of the department, it would not be out of place to give an account of its resources

both in manuscript records and in printed documents. The former includes the ancient papers of the East India Company consisting of about 26,000 bound volumes and 1,505,000 unbound documents, the whole covering as many as 17,902,000 folios. The department also houses the major portion of the current records of the various agencies of the central government down to the year 1941, available mostly in print. The number is on the increase, thanks to annual accessions, and the latest available figures for the volumes and bundles of records accommodated in the department are 61,000 and 29,000, respectively. The whole series now occupies almost thirteen miles of shelf space. Hardly less deserving of notice are the printed publications in the library section of the department now totaling above 75,000 volumes, which have lately been classified and catalogued according to the decimal system. These include not only books of general interest but also rare blueprints, parliamentary papers, and a unique collection of no longer easily accessible works on the India of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Although the main archival series in the department begin only from 1748, copies of a large number of interesting collections relating to the earlier years (some of which go as far back as the seventeenth century) have been acquired from the India Office with a view to filling in the lacunae. Among these acquisitions specially deserving of notice are the volumes containing abstracts of correspondence between the East India Company and their servants in India between 1707 and 1748. The correspondence for later years is available in the original in an unbroken series and constitutes a unique source for the modern period of Indian history. Hardly of less interest to the historian is the series known as Original Consultations, among which is to be found the minutes, memoranda, and proposals drawn up by the East Indian administrators and their correspondence with their agents all over the country, revealing not only the inner working of the various administrative machinery but also the social, political, and economic conditions of the time. Especially fascinating to the student of anthropology and geography would be the records relating to the travellers, explorers, and other field workers who came to India in quest of new light. Mention may be made in this connection of the papers on Csoma de Koros, the Hungarian traveller (1831-1832), and the famous Schlagentweit brothers (1861), the excellent work of Major Leech on the Hindi dialect of Bundelkhaund (1844),

Captain Mackenzie's fascinating account of the Gond, Kurku, and Nihal dialects (1873), and Captain Lane's learned report on the Manbhow sect (1874). For the orientalist a wealth of useful materials is provided by the thirty attractive volumes of Turki manuscripts acquired by the late Sir E. Denison Ross from Central Asia as also by the magnificent collection of Oriental letters ranging from 1764 to 1873 to which a reference has already been made. Most of these letters are in Persian but a great many are also available in Sanskrit, Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi, Burmese, and even in Chinese, Siamese, and Tibetan. The bibliophile as well as the archivist will be delighted and enthralled by the original manuscripts and first drafts of world-famous works like Prinsep's *Alexander's Expedition to India*, Alexander Burne's *Memoir on the Indus* (1831), Syme's *Embassy to Ava* (1800), Anderson's *Mission to Sumatra*, Malcolm's *Memoir on Malwa*, and Tod's monographs on the Pindaris. Among other treasures in which the department can justly take pride are a number of exquisitely lettered and artistically illuminated manuscripts, a representative collection of which is now on display in show-cases along with other noteworthy public documents.

It was Grant Duff who once spoke of the East India Company's records as the "best historical materials in the world," and what he said more than a century ago, perhaps applies today with even greater force to the records preserved in this department. Indeed, it will not be too much to say that no documented study of any aspect of Indian life can be regarded as complete which has not fully utilized this unique storehouse of information.

III. *Preservation of Records*

We may now turn to the measures taken by the department for the protection and preservation of this rich heritage from the past. The building which now houses the records is situated on the Queensway, New Delhi, and conforms in the main to the plan drawn up by Sir Edwin Lutyens and A. F. Scholfield. The front portion of the building is an imposing two-storied structure of extremely strong and heavy construction in which are located the office, the laboratory, the reading, and the research rooms of the department. The stack area for the records is an adjoining three-storied building resting on a steel frame which also carries the weight of the steel shelves with

which each story has been fitted. The windows in the area are furnished with wrought-iron grills and the main entrances with collapsible steel doors. As a precaution against fire the whole building has been provided with fire-fighting equipment which includes an automatic sprinkler system for the stack area, a number of minimax extinguishers, and a siren alarm. A staff has been adequately trained in the up-to-date methods of fire-fighting. Among other plans which are being considered by the Government of India for affording further protection to its archives, but which obviously cannot be implemented during the present emergency, may be mentioned the installation of an air-conditioning plant designed to eliminate dust from the muniment rooms and to control the temperature and humidity of the air which is normally far from the optimum during the major part of the year. As a check to the dust nuisance the department is at present using a number of vacuum cleaners in the record rooms.

Every possible care is taken to afford each individual document in the stacks the maximum amount of protection. The most delicate among these are deposited in boxes specially made for the purpose, while those in a good state of preservation are kept in bundles bound with strong wooden or synthetic boards. All unbound documents are wrapped in protective shell-covers. An exception is provided by the folded records of the early period, a large number of which are opened, flattened, and sewed into protective covers each year. The damaged and badly preserved documents are repaired according to the most approved scientific methods, usually with chiffon and Japanese tissue paper. The tremendous amount of work accomplished by the preservation branch of the department will easily be gathered from the last three years' figures of repair done: the number of folios rehabilitated in 1940 was 170,000; in 1941, 280,000; while the figure for 1942 was 680,000. With a view to speeding up the repair work still further and to affording the records better protection, the department has decided to introduce lamination with cellulose acetate foil by means of a hydraulic press which has been tried in America with very satisfactory results. The work however cannot be taken up for the present owing to the unavailability of the necessary apparatus.

Other duties of the preservation branch include rebinding of worn volumes, treatment of leather bindings with preservative chemicals, and the periodic fumigation of records with thymol and paradichlorobenzene as a protection against attacks from mildew spores and insect

pests. The department still lacks a proper vacuum fumigating vault although it intends to install one as soon as the machinery is available. But pending its introduction the fumigation is being done in several improvised cabinets and an air-tight steel almirah equipped with the necessary contrivances. As a further precaution against ravages of insects naphthalene bricks are being extensively used in the open shelves as well as in the pamphlet boxes. Anxious as the department has always been to safeguard its valuable treasures from the consequences of decay, it accepted in 1937, an ambitious scheme of typing out all its faded and brittle documents. With the same object in view it has recently acquired microfilming apparatus and expects to begin filming the records as soon as the machinery and its accessories are installed.

IV. *Laboratory and Technical Research*

The department formerly relied on the advice of the experts in foreign countries regarding all technical questions. But convinced, in view of the peculiar climatic conditions in India, of the need of carrying on experiments on its own account, it has recently established a research laboratory. The regular program of the laboratory includes examination, analysis, and selection of Japanese tissue paper, chiffon, leather preservative dressing, and other repairing materials which are finally used for the rehabilitation of records, as well as research on the composition of old and modern papers and on the chemical methods of restoring faded writings. Among the more important investigations conducted in the laboratory mention may be made of those on the effect of different chemicals on insects like *gastrallus indicus*. The department has succeeded in developing a type of insecticidal paper for the protection of books and documents against insects and fungi. The paper is prepared by sizing it in a chemical bath, trimming it to the exact size of a book, and placing it between the flyleaves and covers, which are particularly susceptible to insect attack. The function of the paper base is to retain the insecticidal chemicals and to develop a local concentration of lethal gas strong enough to kill the grubs, particularly of *gastrallus indicus*, as well as to prevent further infestation. It has also been found that mildew cannot develop in its presence even at a very high humidity and that the ink and fiber of even the most delicate documents are not adversely affected by the chemicals.

The laboratory is rapidly widening its scope of work owing to

the increasing number of inquiries it receives each year from outside agencies and public institutions about practical problems of preservation. Of the experiments undertaken on behalf of such agencies especially worthy of note are those made with the worm-eaten palm-leaf manuscript sent by the Governmental Oriental Library, Mysore. Experiments have convinced the department of the efficacy of fumigation with paradichlorobenzene in curing palmleaves of the after-effects of mildew and insectal attacks.

V. The Record Office and the Official Bodies

Hardly less important than the duties connected with the preservation of records are those which the department has to discharge in facilitating their use in the day-to-day business of the central government. These duties, heavy as they are, are steadily on the increase, as will be clear from the figures given below:

	1900	1907	1931	1940	1942
1. Number of requisitions complied with	6,000	11,000	20,000	24,000	25,000
2. Number of papers restored	6,000	10,000	18,000	20,000	19,000

Mention also may be made in this connection of the extensive research undertaken by the department on behalf of official agencies searching for fresh facts to illumine current administrative problems. Such investigations form part of the daily routine of the department, which can rightly take pride in the important, if indirect, part it has been playing in facilitating the work of administration.

VI. Relations with the World of Scholarship

More noteworthy from the standpoint of the scholar are the various measures taken by the department to render its valuable treasures accessible to research. Indeed it has never looked upon the records as a miser's hoard. Even as early as 1900 the principle had been fairly established that the record office should give as much information as it could to outsiders on matters of research. It was not until 1939, however, that the momentous step was taken by the Government of India of throwing open the portals of their muniment rooms. The immediate effect of this measure was to render available for research all records of the central government from the earliest times to 1880. The response created by this new policy among the

scholarly public can be easily measured by the progressive increase in the number of research workers visiting the reading room of the department. Since 1940 no less than one hundred students have conducted research among the records in the central custody, and the excerpts released during this period exceed 43,000 sheets of type-scripts of foolscap size. The department has considerably reduced the task of the scholar by providing him with a descriptive handbook to the records, a complete set of catalogues for all the different classes of documents, and press lists for some of the series. But the department intends to do more and has taken up the compilation of a comprehensive index for all its records from the earliest times to 1858, which when completed, will furnish the public with a book of reference on India more detailed and more elaborate than anything hitherto attempted. Two volumes of indexes to the revenue records (1830-1859) already published under the scheme have won the approbation of both oriental and occidental scholars.

VII. *Publication Program and Indian Historical Records Commission*

A reference has already been made to the early publication ventures of the department. The volumes published in the series entitled Calendar of Persian Correspondence now number seven and cover the years 1759-1787. The eighth volume is ready for publication and the whole series is expected to be completed in another ten years. Creditable as these ventures have been, the Government of India has for some time past been feeling the supreme urgency of adopting for the department an even more comprehensive and better planned program. Convinced, however, that success in such ambitious projects can be ensured only by enlisting the active collaboration of provincial governments, universities, Indian states, and learned societies in the work, the government as a preliminary step thoroughly reorganized the Indian Historical Records Commission, a body of experts which has since 1919 been co-operating with the government in an advisory capacity. Under the new constitution the provincial and state governments, the universities, and other learned bodies have become entitled to nominate their representatives on the commission as well as its newly created adjunct, the Research and Publication Committee, upon which has devolved the task of organizing the academic activities of the commission. One result of this democratization of the commission has been that the provinces and the states as

well as the universities and the learned institutions are now taking a keen interest in its activities.

The reconstituted commission has drawn up a five-year publication program for the Imperial Record Department which consists of three distinct parts: (1) the printing in extenso of all correspondence between the Fort William authorities in Bengal and the East India House for the period 1748-1800; (2) the publication of the Indian portions of Thevenot's and Carreri's travels, of the correspondence of James Browne with Warren Hastings, 1782-1785, and the minutes of Sir John Shore; and lastly (3) the printing of all records in Oriental languages. The keeper of the records of the Government of India, who is the general editor of all the series, has been entrusted with the editing of the volumes of the second group, while the Fort William and India House correspondence are being edited by eminent scholars representing the various learned bodies who have become institutional members of the commission. The records in Oriental languages are being published through private agencies, although the Imperial Record Department is rendering all possible assistance in the work. The first volume of the series, containing 170 Bengali letters, has been edited by the keeper of records, and the Calcutta University is bearing the cost of its publication. The Hindi letters have been taken up by the Allahabad University, the Persian newsletters by the University of Delhi, and the Marathi letters by the Bharat Itihasa Samshodhaka Mandala of Poona, while the selection of letters in other languages is in good progress. The Indian Historical Records Commission is also endeavoring to persuade the provincial and state record offices to accept similar publication programs.

VIII. *Services to the Cause of Archives*

The department has since its inception been aware of the need of safeguarding from decay the raw materials of India's history, whether in its own custody or that of other bodies, official or non-official. The recommendations which it has made from time to time in this respect to the provincial and state governments bear eloquent testimony to the acute interest it has been taking in the problem. It is no wonder that the sister record offices in India, many of which owe their present organization to such recommendations, have always looked up to it for inspiration and guidance. In this great mission of salvaging the

treasures of the past, the Imperial Record Department has been actively co-operating with the Indian Historical Records Commission. The latter body, after its reconstitution, has mapped out a general scheme of regional surveys for rescuing manuscripts in private custody from the inevitable consequences of neglect and oblivion. Although the provinces have not been able to do much in this respect owing to the conditions brought about by the war, no less than twenty-one states have readily responded to the invitation to participate in this great scheme. The record department has given the lead by taking over nearly nine thousand volumes of military records from the Bombay government and three hundred bundles of the North West Frontier Province records, as the original custodians were unable to provide for their proper care.

This note would be incomplete unless a reference is made to the department's activities in disseminating the knowledge which long experience has enabled it to acquire in the technical matters relating to archives keeping and scientific treatment of records. Indeed, from the very first, it has been its avowed policy to share this knowledge with not only the sister record offices but also all institutions interested in documents. It has sought to achieve the object in the following ways: (1) by publishing from time to time a number of pamphlets on archival theory and practice and scientific methods of repair of documents; (2) by freely supplying information on these vital topics to such offices and institutions as have actually applied for them; (3) by sending out trained hands to offices soliciting their guidance and assistance in repairing their own records; and (4) by training men deputed by provincial and state record offices in scientific methods of repair and preservation. It is not possible to note the names of all who readily took advantage of the unique facilities thus offered. The most prominent name that may be recalled in this connection is that of the Madras Record Office, which not only sent its men for training in the scientific method of repair of records, but also on various occasions sought and obtained from the premier record office instructions on technical questions. Among other names may be mentioned those of the Punjab Record Office, the State Record Office of Baroda, the Assam government, Dafter-i-Diwani, Mal-o-Mulki, Hyderabad, the Central Provinces government, the Gwalior, Jodhpur, and the Alwar Durbars, the Archaeological Survey of India, Eastern Circle, the Bombay Secretariat

Library, to mention only a few. It has been a matter of no small satisfaction to the department that it has been able to render so much help to these institutions.

In view of the present lack of trained archivists in India, the department set up in 1942 a regular training scheme with a definitive syllabus of studies under which provision has been made for instructing candidates deputed by provincial and state governments as well as learned institutions in the theory and practice of archival organization and preservation of records. The candidate completing the full two years' course of prescribed studies under the scheme is awarded a diploma. This new measure has met with a very wide response among Indian archivists. Among those who have availed themselves of the facilities offered under the scheme may be mentioned the Orissa government, Hyderabad, Baroda, Cochin, Sirmur, and Tehri-Garhwal states, the Commercial College (Delhi), the Deccan College (Poona), and the universities of Bombay and Calcutta.

The Imperial Record Department has thus done a great deal to arouse public interest in historical documents. But it is fully conscious that much more remains to be done. To all who are interested in this mission of preserving the country's past, it has offered its free and full co-operation. It is on this "will to service" that the title of its existence remains secure.

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