

# *Archives in India*

by S.N. PRASAD

The eventful centuries of India's long history has left behind a huge quantity of precious archival material in more than a dozen distinct languages, many different scripts, in various states of preservation, and scattered throughout the country. Much of the documentation belonging to the pre-European period of Indian history is to be found in private custody, in the families of the old nobility, business houses, and religious institutions. Some records of the pre-European period are also available in organized archival repositories, particularly those connected with the old princely houses, such as the State Archives of Andhra Pradesh (previously Hyderabad State) and Rajasthan. Continuous series of archives of the post-European period are available in archival repositories established by the European powers such as those at Goa, Madras and Calcutta. The Goa archives has regular series of records dating back to the early days of the Portuguese occupation from the beginning of the seventeenth century; the regular records series in the National Archives of India begin with the middle of the eighteenth century; records of the Dutch and French administrations in India are also available and have been supplemented by the acquisition of some microfilms from the former colonial powers.

Under its federal structure, India has no monolithic archives organisation; in other words, the National Archives of Indian has no administrative or technical control over the score of State Archives in the country. Each State Archives is considered an integral part of the governmental machinery of the State concerned, and the subject of archives figures in the Indian Constitution in the "States' List" and not in the "Central List" or even the "Concurrent List". There is, therefore, an obvious problem of maintaining unified archival doctrine and common archival practices throughout the country. This problem is being tackled through the Indian Historical Records Commission (IHRC), established as early as 1919. This Commission, with the Union Minister for Education and Culture as its president, and the Director of the National Archives of India as its Member Secretary, brings together archivists, scholars and administrators at an all-India level. National archival policy, and even details such as publication programmes, access rules, and preparation of different types of reference media, are discussed and decided at the annual sessions of the Commission. The recommendations of the Commission, however, are not binding on the National and State Archives organisations, although the

recommendations do carry substantial weight and are very carefully considered.

Details of archival practices and doctrines are discussed and settled in the National Committee of Archivists (NCA) which has the Director of the National Archives as its chairman and heads of each of the State Archives as members. Although the NCA also has an advisory role, its decisions have very great weight in professional matters. The IHRC and the NCA thus provide effective coordination and unified guidance in archival work throughout the country. This somewhat loose organisation is considered the best system for India since some of the State Archives are still quite undeveloped, and the same yardsticks and practices cannot be applied *in toto* to each archives.



*Front view, National Archives of India, Janpath, New Delhi.*

The Imperial Records Department (IRD) was created in 1891 at Calcutta, which was then the seat of the central government. When the capital moved to New Delhi, the IRD also moved there in about 1930. After India achieved independence in 1947, the Imperial Records Department was renamed the National Archives of India. Housed in a massive stone building of its own, the National Archives of India today has twenty-six kilometres or sixteen miles of shelving crammed with records. It has two regional branches, at Bhopal and Jaipur. The total staff of the National Archives numbers approximately 550; about half of the personnel consists of professionals with graduate or post-graduate degrees. The total annual budget is approximately six million Indian rupees (slightly more than Can. \$850,000). Although there is no archival law, the National Archives has the responsibility for records management in all the five hundred agencies and departments of the Government of India scattered throughout the country. This responsibility, enunciated in the Archival Policy Resolution issued with Cabinet approval in 1972, is binding on all agencies and departments of the Government of India. The Legislature and the Judiciary are not covered by the Archival Policy Resolution.



## THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly Preamble.  
resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN DEMO-  
CRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens :

JUSTICE, social, economic and political ;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and  
worship ;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity ;

and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual  
and the unity of the Nation ;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-  
sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT,  
ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS  
CONSTITUTION.

In keeping with this responsibility, the National Archives has a Records Management wing concerned with the creation, indexing, recording, and appraisal of the records of the Government of India before their transfer to the National Archives. This aspect is headed by a Deputy Director with three Assistant Directors of Archives and qualified professional staff to assist him. A fourth Assistant Director is in charge of the Records Division, and is concerned with the maintenance of non-current records transferred to the National Archives, preparation of their reference media where necessary, and the supply of records to government departments and research scholars. Yet another Assistant Director deals solely with the old records in oriental languages in which Persian figures prominently. The publication of selected records is the responsibility of another division under an Assistant Director. One Assistant Director is charged with running the Institute of Archival Training which provides a one-year diploma course, a one-year correspondence course, and a brief certificate course in archives administration and records management. The National Archives has offered such training facilities for several decades, and since it is the only archival training available in this part of the world, trainees of many developing countries—from the Philippines in the east to Nigeria in the west—have taken advantage of this education. The National Archives charges no fees whatsoever for this training.

The Preservation and Reprography Division are headed by two Assistant Directors with fully qualified conservation scientists working under their supervision. Although the Preservation Division of the National Archives has a huge hydraulic press for lamination, in addition to the electrically operated modern laminating machine, greater emphasis is placed on the hand lamination process (solvent lamination) developed in the National Archives itself some years ago. This method is favoured by all the developing countries because it is labour intensive and requires no imported and costly machines. The Reprography Division is equipped with several heavy duty and two portable microfilm cameras, in addition to two quick copying machines. Super miniaturization equipment and automatic data processing have yet to make their appearance in the National Archives of India.

The vast bulk of the records holdings in archival repositories in India naturally deal with events and developments within the country, documenting every facet of the life of the people and the activities of the government and other institutions. However, the records of the erstwhile colonial powers such as the British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese, contain substantial material of interest to other countries. In this connection, it may be recalled that the Portuguese ruled their entire Eastern Empire from Goa, the seat of the Portuguese viceroy, and that the interests of the British East India Company, with headquarters at Calcutta, extended from Egypt and Aden in the west to Hong Kong in the east. The holdings of the Goa Archives and of the National Archives of India, therefore, contain valuable material on most of the countries of this part of the world. Records concerning Canada are negligible in comparison. There are only a few documents from the second half of the nineteenth century pertaining to Canada among the Foreign Department records in the National Archives of India. For example, there is a complaint by Canadian missionaries in 1883 against the Holkar, one of the major princely states, about hindering missionaries from carrying on their work. There was a Canadian Mission



Illuminated Bhutanese document. A letter dated 27 November 1836 from the King of Bhutan (ruler of an independent kingdom in the north-east of the Indian sub-continent). The decoration represents rare specimens of the Indo-Tibetan style of painting. (Foreign Department, Original receipt No. 91B, 14 April 1837)

School, at Holkar's capital, Indore, which received grants from Imperial revenues till 1885. With the arrival of greater contact and better communications, there are comparatively more documents of Canadian interest in the twentieth century records.

Generally speaking, the thirty-year rule applies to archival institutions in India although each repository frames its own regulation. Certain types of records concerning the border areas are not yet open to scholars even though the records are more than thirty years old. Foreigners wishing to consult the records in archival repositories require prior clearance from the government. The National Archives of India and the other major repositories help scholars to obtain typed or photo copies of excerpts from records. Finding aids are generally, but not uniformly, adequate, and the trained and experienced staff in the research rooms provide assistance to scholars in locating the records of their interest.

Archival publications are produced by all the major repositories. The National Archives of India, for example, has brought out nineteen volumes of the Fort William—India House Correspondence, to make available to scholars these important documents in their own libraries. Two more volumes of this series are awaited to complete the publication programme. Publications to June 1978 of the National Archives include the following:

- *Fort William—India House correspondence*. Between Court of Directors in London and the Fort William Council at Calcutta, 1748-1800. Twenty-one volumes are planned of which eighteen have so far been published as public letters, political and secret letters, and military letters. Each is edited by a noted historian and contains a comprehensive introduction, copious notes, select bibliography, exhaustive index, and illustrations.
- *Browne correspondence*. A collection of letters written to or received from Warren Hastings, John Macpherson and others by James Browne, Hastings' personal envoy to the court of Shah Alam II, 20 April 1782 to 6 October 1785.
- *Selections from educational records*. From 1781 to 1907 covering reports on aspects of Indian education, including development of university (1860-1887) and technical (1886-1907) education.
- *Calendar of Persian correspondence*. Contains English summaries of letters exchanged between the Indian Governors-General, East Indian Company agents and Indian rulers, chiefs and notables, 1759-1795.
- *Descriptive lists and indexes*. Of mutiny papers at Bhopal, 1857-1859 (four volumes), Secret department records, 1776-1780, and Foreign and Political department records, 1781-1783.
- *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission*. Covering 1919-1920, 1924-1925, 1948-1951, 1953-1958, 1960, 1966, 1970-1971, 1973, 1975-1976.
- *Indian Travels of Trevenot and Caveri*. Two accounts of European observations in seventeenth century Indians.
- *Old Fort William at the Black Hole* (1904).
- *Sepoy recruitment in the Old Madras Army* (1923).
- *Catalogue of historical maps of the survey of India, 1700-1900*. Contains 7,949 maps in the custody of the National Archives of India.



Two early nineteenth century seals of the Governor General of India. The seal on the facing page belonged to William Pitt Amherst, Governor General 1823-1828, with the legend in Persian. (National Archives of India)

- *The Indian Archives*. 1947-1949 (quarterly), 1949- (half-yearly).
- *National Reports of Private Records*. An all-Indian inventory of the archival wealth in private ownership based on data forwarded by different states, 1959-

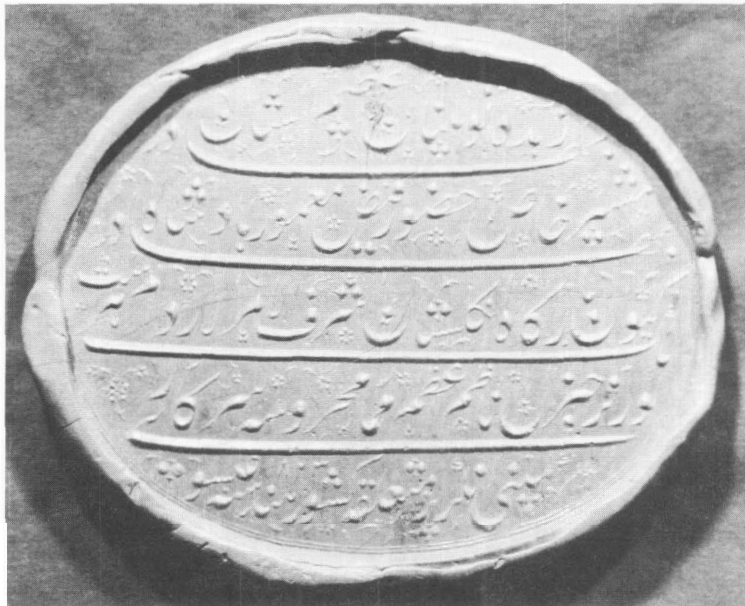
A guide to the National Archives, annual reports from 1955, brochures, and committee proceedings of the National Committee of Archives are also available. The National Archives also has published the bi-annual journal *The Indian Archives* for the last several decades. Most of the publications are sold on subsidized prices to promote academic research and *The Indian Archives* journal is obtained by many foreign institutions in exchange for their own publications.

Although the National Archives and many of the State Archives are old, well organized and large institutions, they face numerous difficulties and problems relating generally to the overall national as well as the local contexts. In the national context there is an imbalance since official records of the colonial

rulers completely overshadow records of the Indian rulers. The records of the pre-European period, even where not destroyed, have yet to be centralized and are still lying scattered in private hands. Many of the rulers of the erstwhile princely states have taken away the State records as their private property. The private papers of eminent Indians have also yet to be collected and centralized, although the National Archives and some other institutions have made a good beginning here. This situation has resulted in most research work being based almost wholly upon the records of the colonial administrations, making difficult the reinterpretation of modern Indian history from the Indian viewpoint. The Antiquities Act, which recently came into force, regulates the export of old records along with other antiquities. The problem remains, though, of acquiring and preserving records of historical, sentimental, or aesthetic value without violating the rights of private ownership.

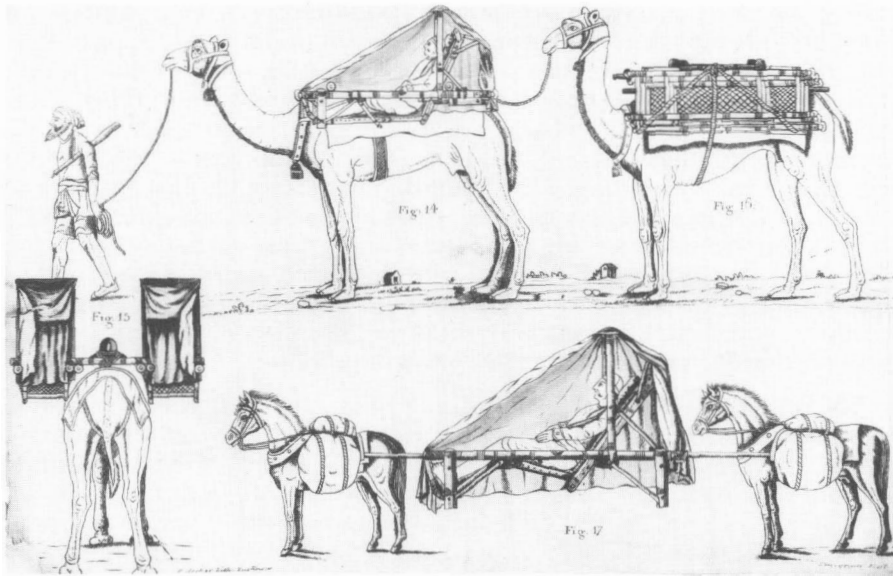
The bewildering diversity of the Indian civilisation has left behind records in more than a dozen different Indian languages and scripts which differ significantly from their modern and current versions. Scholars having command of the old languages and scripts, such as Persian in *shikasta* script, Modi-Marathi, and Oriya, are fast declining in numbers. Even the archival institutions are finding it difficult to locate persons familiar with these ancient languages and scripts. While no realistic solution of the general problem is in sight, it is proposed to encourage the study of the old languages and scripts by archivists through a grant of special language pay.

Much archival material relevant to the history of India is to be found in the old colonial countries. In some cases, such as the French, records were physically removed from India before the colonial regime ended. In other cases, such as the British, documents were acquired and taken away, or created by





## ARCHIVARIA



Transport of sick and wounded from the battlefield. *Illustration from a report to the Military Department from the Adjutant General of the Army, 24 August 1846.* (Military Department, Consultation Nos. 87-92, 10 October 1846)

agencies of the Indian Government located in the colonial country. The former colonial powers consistently refuse to return records to India. The problem of these “migrated archives” has come to the fore in recent years and UNESCO is presently engaged in studying this problem and suggesting possible solutions.\*

Within the country, archival institutions have to compete for funds with other pressing national priorities like health and literacy programmes, and the removal of poverty. There is also the usual public apathy and bureaucratic indifference towards archival development. No drastic improvement in this situation appears likely in the near future. It is only the patient and persistent efforts of archivists, supported by the growing voice of enlightened national interest and the world community of scholars, that can ensure the proper preservation and utilisation of the marvellous archival wealth of India,

\* See report on “Seventeenth International Round Table Conference”, *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-78): 156-7.

## Résumé

Bien que très morcelées, les archives de l’Inde ne constituent pas moins qu’un riche ensemble documentaire rédigé en plusieurs langues, encore mal connu et peu exploité du fait de la pénurie de personnel qualifié. L’auteur décrit le travail des Archives nationales et signale les moyens mis en oeuvre pour récupérer les archives du régime impérial britannique.