

# ARCHIVES AND ACCESS

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**Researchers @ Work**

Histories of the Internet in India

## HISTORIES OF THE INTERNET

The last two decades have marked the rise and spread of digital and internet technologies in the rapidly globalizing world. Especially in the first ten years of the 21st Century, we have seen governments fall, markets reorganized and civil societies mobilized through extraordinary civic action mediated by easy and affordable access to the everyday citizen/user. Despite the marked change that the digital revolution has ushered in a large section of emerging ICT landscapes, there is a presumption that these technologies were built in specific centres of the developed world and were seamlessly transplanted on to the developing world.

In research, policy and practice, while there is an emphasis to using digital and internet technologies, very little attention is paid to the polymorphous and localized growth and emergence of internet technologies. Although many disciplines, organisations and interventions in various areas deal with internet technologies, there has been very little work in documenting the polymorphous growth of internet technologies and their relationship with society in India. The existing narratives of the internet are often riddled with absences or only focus on the mainstream interests of major stakeholders, like the state and the corporate. We find it imperative to excavate the three-decade histories of the internet to understand the contemporary concerns and questions in the field.

The Centre for Internet and Society's Researchers @ Work (CIS-RAW) series was designed to build local intellectual resources for mapping and understanding the complex interactions between the rise of digital and internal technologies and the spheres of living that they influence. The pervasive and ubiquitous presence of Internet technologies in our rapidly globalising lives, is forcing us to revisit older concepts, formulate new frameworks, and pose new questions within academic and practice based research.

For the first cycle, CIS-RAW adopted “Histories of the Internet(s) in India” as its thematic focus. The impetus in formulating this theme was to complicate the picture of how Internet and digital technologies are perceived in existing discourse and practice. We wanted to first propose that the Internet is not a monolithic object that exists in the same way across geographies and social borders. It is necessary to approach the Internets, as plural, available in different forms, practices and experiences to people from different locations and sections of the society. This pluralistic approach allows us to break away from a grand-narrative of the Internet which generally thinks of the technology as built in the West and seamlessly transplanted on to the East and the South. It opens up the idea that the Internet can be an object, a process, an imagination, and that each of these nuances adds to how we can study its techno-social existence.

The second proposal was that while the digital and Internet technologies are new, they do not necessarily only produce new things. There is a need to map the histories and pre-histories of Internets. These histories cannot be merely historical accounts of infrastructure and access. They have to contextualise and locate the interactions between Internets and Society, through different historical approaches. The idea was to show the continuities and disjunctures that the Internets are a part of, by locating them within a larger technology complex. The histories need to show how the Internets have shaped and been shaped by various concepts, bodies and practices in India. And for this, we went to the histories that preceded the Internets as well as the futures that have been articulated around how these technologies will change the world that we shall one day live in.

To produce context specific, locally relevant and accessible histories of the Internets was the third proposal. We wanted to emphasise that while global referents can be useful in shaping a trans-national, hyperterritorial discourse around the Internet and its practices, there is a need to deepen the research through located knowledges and frameworks. We wanted to suggest that the research that emerges out of this inquiry is indeed very specific to the Indian context. It cannot simply be used as

a framework to understand another geo-political position, because it draws from specific actors' ideas that have influenced and created the complex interplay between internet technologies and socio-cultural-political-economic practices in the country. Simultaneously, we hope that the different modes of inquiry, methods by which new dialogues were generated between different disciplines, and the methods by which frameworks of inquiry were created, would be useful tools for any researcher, on any site, interested in questions of Internet and Society.

The 9 monographs in this series are dramatically different in writing styles, in subjects of study, and in length. Each one pushes the argument from a particular discipline position and concentrates on specific objects and spaces for the inquiry. And yet, it is possible to cluster them around three specific sub-themes which make visible the over-laps and the synergies between them.

## I. PRE-HISTORIES OF THE INTERNETS IN INDIA

One of the attempts of the CIS-RAW research was to break away from the utopian public discourse of the Internets as a-historical and completely dis-attached from existing technology ecologies in the country. It was imperative for us to produce frameworks that help us contextualize the contemporary internet policy, discourse and practice within larger geo-political and socio-historical flows and continuities in Modern India. The first cluster of research charts three different pre-histories of the Internets while focusing on specific disciplines and practices from a technology-society point of view.

Asha Achuthan initiates a historical research inquiry to understand the ways in which gendered bodies are shaped by the Internet imaginaries in contemporary India. Tracing the history from nationalist debates between Gandhi and Tagore to the neo-liberal perspective based knowledges produced by feminists like Martha Nussbaum, it offers a unique entry point into cybercultures studies through a Feminist epistemology of Science and Technology. The monograph establishes that

there is a certain pre-history to the Internet that needs to be unpacked in order to understand the digital interventions on the body in a range of fields from social sciences theory to medical health practices to technology and science policy in the country.

This finds many parallels and linkages with Ashish Rajadhyaksha's work that is informed by the 'last mile' which has emerged as a central area of discussion in the domains of technology and governance since the 1940s in India. Beginning by mapping technology onto developmentalist-democratic priorities which propelled communication technologies since at least the invention of radio in India, the project conceives of the 'last mile' as a mode of techno-democracy, where connectivity has been directly translated into democratic citizenship. Giving a comprehensive overview of the different histories of technology mediated governance structures in the country, the monograph explores how the new state-citizen-market relationships gets radically restructured with the emergence of Internet technologies in India. The analysis looks at contemporary debates on policy, pedagogy and practice by offering a new prism to explore instances like the Unique Identity Project without falling into older partisan positions that these projects often inspire.

The third research inquiry by Aparna Balachandran and Rochelle Pinto is a material history of the internet archives, that looks at the role of the archivist and the changing relationship between the state and private archives in order to look at the politics of subversion, preservation and value of archiving. Looking at the dual sites of Tamil Nadu and Goa state archives, along with the larger public and State archives in the country, the project looks at the materiality of archiving, the ambitions and aspirations of an archive, and why it is necessary to preserve archives, not as historical artefacts but as living interactive spaces of memory and remembrance. The findings have direct implications on various government and market impulses to digitise archives and show a clear link between opening up archives and other knowledge sources for breathing life into local and alternative histories.

## II. PROCESSES OF THE INTERNETS IN INDIA

One of the biggest concerns about internet studies in India and other similar developed contexts is the object oriented approach that looks largely at specific usages, access, infrastructure etc. However, it is necessary to understand that the Internet is not merely a tool or a gadget. The growth of Internets produces systemic changes at the level of process and thought. The technologies often get appropriated for governance both by the State and the Civil Society, producing new processes and dissonances which need to be charted. The second cluster looks at certain contemporary processes that the digital and internet technologies change drastically in order to recalibrate the relationship between the State, the Market and the Citizen.

Zainab Bawa looks at the emergence of Internet technologies, the rise of e-governance initiatives and the way in which the rhetoric of ‘transparency’ has informed different ways by which the relationship between the state and the citizen in India have been imagined. The project produces case-studies of various e-governance models that have been variously experimented within India, to see how Internet technologies through their material presence, through different paradigms of interaction, and through the imagination in policy have brought about a significant change in the state–citizen relationship.

These debates are taken to an entirely different level by Namita Malhotra’s focus on pornography, pleasure and law, where she finds a new point of entry into existing debates by looking at legal construction of pleasure through different technologies of mass consumption. She revisits the arguments around pornography, obscenity and affect in recent times. Malhotra produces a comprehensive over-view of different debates, both in the West and in India, to concentrate on how the visual aesthetics of pornography, the new circuits of pornographic consumption, the privilege of affect over regulation lead to possibilities of interaction and negotiation with heteronormative power structures in the country. The monograph demonstrates how the grey zones of pornography and the law’s inability to deal with it, offer new

conceptual tools of understanding the spaces of digital interaction and identity.

Anja Kovacs examines another set of relationships as she explores the emerging field of online activism in India. She maps the actors, audiences, messages and methods privileged by online activism as it is emerging in India, to build frameworks which understand the ways in which such activism reconstitutes received notions of activism and activists in the country. As online activism, in the process of its materialisation, reworks master narratives, and refashions what are seen as 'appropriate' processes, methods and goals for political engagement, what are the new contours of the public sphere — of which the larger landscape of struggles for social justice in India, too, is part — is what emerges from the project.

## HISTORY OF THE FUTURES OF INTERNETS IN INDIA

The third cluster looks at contemporary practices of the Internet to understand the recent histories of movements, activism and cultural practices online. It offers an innovative way of understanding the physical objects and bodies that undergo dramatic transitions as digital technologies become pervasive, persuasive and ubiquitous. It draws upon historical discourse, everyday practices and cultural performances to form new ways of formulating and articulating the shapes and forms of social and cultural structures.

The monograph on Internet, Society and Space in Indian Cities, by Pratyush Shankar, is an entry into debates around making of IT Cities and public planning policies that regulate and restructure the city spaces in India with the emergence of Internet technologies. Going beyond the regular debates on the modern urban, the monograph deploys a team of students from the field of architecture and urban design to investigate how city spaces – the material as well as the experiential – are changing under the rubric of digital globalisation. Placing his inquiry in the built form, Shankar manoeuvres discourse from architecture, design, cultural studies and urban geography to look at the notions of cyber-publics, digital spaces, and

planning policy in India. The findings show that the relationship between cities and cyberspaces need to be seen as located in a dynamic set of negotiations and not as a mere infrastructure question. It dismantles the presumptions that have informed public and city planning in the country by producing alternative futures of users' interaction and mapping of the emerging city spaces.

Nitya Vasudevan and Nithin Manayath bring to light the relationship between queer identity and technology in their work, looking at both the histories and the futures of sexuality and its relationship with internet technologies. They claim that the Internet is treated as a site of knowledge and practice, involving not just the imagined individual with his or her personal computer but also physical spaces, categories of subject formation, ways of knowing, aesthetics and modes of identification. They look at the ways in which Queerness as an identity is shaped by technology and also how the imaginations of being queer propel technology usage in new and unexpected directions. Their focus is to posit the idea of 'Queer Technologies' that challenge existing gender-sexuality debates and provide hints of what the future has in store.

Joining them in keeping a finger on the pulse of the future is Arun Menon, who enters the brave new world of gaming. His project aims to examine 'attention' as a conduit for material and non-material transactions within and outside of game worlds. This includes the internal market in the game world as well as the secondary market which operates outside of the game world. The possibilities of transaction in 'attention currency' and the intricacies of the 'attention economy / gaming economy' in the game world is explored through a series of interviews and participant observations. It produces a glossary of some of the most crucially debated terms in the field of gaming studies and also unravels the complex interplay of gamers, servers, gaming communities and how they contribute to the new gaming economies by looking at case-studies in India.

I hope that this collaborative research series initiates the first dialogues in the country around questions of Internet and Society within the academic and research communities. The monographs are all available for free downloads online and each one is accompanied by a teaching module which can help educators to introduce these questions in their classrooms. I see these monographs as the beginning rather than the end of research, and hope that the knowledge gaps identified and recommendations made by each research inquiry will lead to further collaborative endeavours in deepening our knowledge in each of the areas.

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14

**CHAPTER ONE:** *INTRODUCTION*

30

**CHAPTER TWO:**

*LAND AND THE UNSTABLE DOCUMENT*

50

**CHAPTER THREE:**

*HISTORY AND THE REGION: THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE*

76

**CHAPTER FOUR:** *IN THE CAPITAL*



# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## THE MUNDANE STATE

14

81

Despite the dank interiors and dusty fragments that greet readers in many archives in India, only a few could be impervious to the excitement of holding a significant document from the past in their hands. Historians have had to confront many challenges to their discipline over the last few decades, some of which focus on the status of the archive itself, the seemingly immovable beginning point of the historian's search. Skepticism about the origins and structure of the archive has shaken the certainty that the archival document is a transparent and neutral record of the way things once were. Ann Stoler's *Along the Archival Grain* explores how in former colonies, the archive worked as a source of bureaucratic power to be exercised over colonial subjects. **Such knowledge about the means and ends by which the archive takes shape works to dispel the historian's excitement when entering the archive: 'If the "taste of the archive" is in the heady rush of discovery, in the sensations and desires the archives stir, ... the colonial archives are the bitter aftertaste of empire, the morsels left for us, their voracious contemporary readers.'** However, no amount of critique can dispel the anticipation awakened when handling a document from a significant point of the past. Perhaps because the tools of empire have been so effectively deployed and improvised by contemporary states, what we experience as its political subjects is not really an 'aftertaste'. Rather it is the fleeting pleasure of political recognition combined with the realization that the moment of our political formation precedes the current state.

Ann Laura Stoler, 'The Pulse of the Archive', in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, 2010, USA, p. 19.

The delight in the historical artifact is scarcely restricted to the feelings of historians. In fact, a consideration of how Internet technology has impacted the experience of the archive forces us to account for the interests that extend beyond the stakes of the historian. A visible sign of how Internet technology has inflected our relation to the past is in the production of nostalgia sites, and the ways in which everyday users have discovered the capacity of the Internet to act simultaneously as storage shelf,

museum, and mode of communication in the recovery of lost pasts. The spatial and temporal dimensions that the Internet is able to generate have been assimilated in popular use to simulate the physical archive, so that shelf depth, accumulation and cataloguing, the attributes of the physical archive, can all be reproduced virtually, with the added advantage of wide and comparatively uninhibited circulation. In fact the stacking facility of the net and the visual aspects of dragging documents to the front to open them on the screen, stand in for a sense of pastness attached to the online document. **The attraction involved in such activity is evident in the construction of the website *Saligaoserenade* for instance, just one among the several websites dedicated to recounting and recovering the histories of different villages in Goa.** Contributors invariably include expatriated Goans' as well as those at home, and provide commentary, photographs as well as personal biographies.

The particular ability that nostalgia sites have, to fuse texts from different periods in history, and belonging to radically different genres, into a stream that is deciphered by the user, stands as a showcase to the idea that the technology has an inherent plasticity. Those who alert us to the totalizing ability of history to provide closed grand narratives that exclude minor histories and entities, could see this as a favourable development; a technology that draws attention to the constituted nature of the conventional archive as it showcases historical texts and documents as alterable images online. The present, according to this view, is no longer hostage to a singular idea of the past. Nostalgia can however, generate as fixed and rigid a version of the past as any formal state-generated history. **Baudrillard refers to the 'panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential' as a deterrent to loss, an activity that can escalate expectations of what the archival document can symbolize and substantiate as cultural and civilization truths.**

When the Internet and the archive meet, the aestheticizing abilities of the net not only nullify the historical separation of texts, but also provide the satisfying opportunity for users to materially piece together and combine images. Such productions of memory, text, and history are instantaneously framed, archived,

(<http://www.saligaoserenade.com/history/>).

<http://www.saligaoserenade.com/>, accessed August 11, 2011.

Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Translated by Shiela Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 6.

exhibited, and re-archived. Our uses of the Internet seems to allow for a bypassing of the rigors or the 'science' of history to slip, by virtue of the visuality of the technology into what we would ordinarily categorize as art, or artifact, or craft. However, though it has enabled the appearance of a vast number of Internet-based historians, this can scarcely be hailed as a diminishing of the totalizing stamp on history on the past. In fact, any apparent blurring of disciplinary authority is also superficial, as despite the wide participation in the recovery of local history, the authority of the published historian and expert is untouched and even strengthened through the Internet. Moreover, the discourse around loss, the loss of touch, of proximity to the past, and the certainty of a move into decline that nostalgia connotes, re-appropriates any blurring of what is a properly historical fact into the binaries of tradition and modernity.

One would have expected that the rhetoric around the recovery of a lost past would sense a source of threat new technology. Most expressions of the idea of a lost tradition invariably signal technology as a cause or at least a symptom of loss, but the Internet has been effortlessly absorbed into the pantheon of technologies deployed for development in India. As a tool of dissemination, it taps into a continuing national belief in the transparency of technology as a tool of mass improvement. An examination of how the state has approached this technology in the context of the archives appears later. What is perhaps more interesting to track are the ways in which our tactile and spatial experience of the archive, our notions of the past and how it can be accessed, have absorbed this new technology. Gunalan Nadarajan, in a summary of recent work on the question of pleasure and technology cites a Kantian separation of the work of technology, its form and intrinsic beauty, from what is mere adornment. He suggests that this has become the customary division between what is assumed to be the primary work of technology and the incidental pleasure associated with it. **Derrida's response to the Kantian division, he notes, is to point to the intertwining of the two, making it difficult to establish a centrality or depth to the functional or formal work of technology over its pleasurable elements.**

Gunalan Nadarajan, 'Pleasures of Technology', in *The New Encyclopaedia Project, TCS Special Issue, 'Problematizing Global Knowledge'* (Volume 23 (2-3) March-May 2007), pp. 267-269

*Goa Chitra*, a museum in Goa devoted to the recovery of old agricultural instruments, forges a relationship between the past and present through beliefs and ideas about different kinds of technology that are evident in the way the museum is organized. In the village of Benaulim in Goa, restorer and now curator, Victor Hugo Gomes self-avowedly devoted recent years towards collecting objects and building a structure that would house objects from what he sees as Goa's vanishing agricultural heritage. A little away from the main gate to the museum are two covered sheds; a wet waste management unit and composting plant. The two units are active, converting cow dung probably and more, into compost that goes into a small farm that lies just beyond the fence. This museum, as its creator intended, is a space that is continuous with the farm, the livestock and the recycling units. There is of course, a difference between the farm and the museum interior. Where the farm and composting plant are in their usual context of use, the objects in the museum are clearly removed from their immediate contexts. Their presence inside a house, where they are objects on view, can be explained by seeing this as Victor's stance against change in Goa.

Gomes intends to draw visitors towards the tactile experience of handmade tools over machine driven agriculture, providing a reconnection with the memory of old instruments. *Goa Chitra* is a response to the perceived splitting of aesthetics, function and technology in the modern world. It points to things that have fallen out of use, hoping to restore them to agricultural life. Its emphasis on the tactile relationship to traditional technology foregrounds an important aspect of our relationship to the paper archive in India. The museum gestures to an ideal time when aesthetics and technology were undifferentiated, by re-placing these objects in the space of a modern museum appended to a farm. This placing of objects is intended to spark cultural memory and a renewal of a way of life where technology entered only to extend, not replace the hand. From the point of view of Victor Hugo Gomes, the curator, there is no disputing the fact that the loss of tactile contact with soil and the implement is the beginning of an overall loss of culture and

consequently, ecological balance. In the textures and sheer number of old wooden instruments, is a sense of touch not entirely lost to us. Goa Chitra seems significant to this discussion not only because the collection raises aesthetics, technology and cultural loss as conjoined questions, but because the aspect of aesthetic experience that it most vividly imparts to us is that of touch. Technology in this case undergoes aesthetic loss itself, and is not only the catalyst for it.

While there is much that we recognize as conventionally old, valuable, and beautiful, the familiar criteria for something that belongs in a museum, Victor's collection also brings other things into this category that makes us look at them anew. Ploughs, sieves, sugarcane crushers, seed sowers and weights and measures of varying sizes, materials and kinds are arranged in an order that is still not clear.



We are familiar enough with cooking pots and other objects that have a more active life in the world of rural communities appearing in our living rooms as objets d'art, and briefly one wonders whether this is a cannibalization of rural life. But this museum tries to side step that problem. The presence of these objects, not yet fully out of use (in as far as fishing and cultivation continue even if with newer instruments) in Goa, begs the question of why it had to be museumised. However, there are precious pieces of handcrafted agricultural technology that are impressive here, and are not in use anymore.



A wooden sugarcane crusher bound with metal for instance, was 'rescued' by the curator and restored. The texture of wood and its areas of damage bear witness to labour that have vanished.



Gomes' act of collection seems to have captured a sense of time that is differentiated across the living farm and waste plant outside, and the objects within. This is a time that is not yet past, not yet safely objectified in other museums, but a world on the brink of dissolution. The collection has emerged, according to Gomes over the last decade by making speedy dashes whenever a phone call summoned him, or foraging into the attics, backyards and household dumps behind and within every home. It is from this past of disuse that Gomes has summoned these implements to make them speak of a relationship to nature that is gone. The new time of his farm and waste plant, demonstrations of how things can be, is a contrast to his ironic museumised repository of objects that are not yet of the past in Goa, just the stuff of storehouses.

There is another museum in Goa called 'Ancestral Goa', visited often by tourists, which has life-size fiberglass figures representing rural Goans frozen in tableaux, which depict, also in fiberglass, the daily life of the village. The one time I was there, accompanied by two people who spent their childhood in Goa of the 1940s and '50s, the ludicrousness of the exhibit was striking. Why, when most of Goa still lives in villages, was it necessary to create these distinctly badly executed figures that were also somehow offensive and caricaturing of everything that began outside the exhibit? When pressed to identify the difference between Ancestral Goa and his museum, Gomes emphasized that nothing in his museum was replicated or recreated, nothing needed to be explained anew, as though he were presenting an alien culture.

My reading of Gomes' museum does not completely replicate his own representations of his objects as a salvaging of a perfect past. **If both museums are somehow about remembering a rural past, how do we explain the apparent distinction between them? Baudrillard's discussion of 'simulacra' as representations that no longer rely on the strength of an original or real object or image suggests how simulacra compensate for perceived loss.** He argues: '(W)hen the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. **There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality — a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity.**' Perhaps the full-size figures of the second installation, Ancestral Goa, in the conventional language of nostalgia is an inappropriate gesture towards loss, as it seems to replace what has glaringly not yet disappeared, humans themselves in the terrain of Goa. Baudrillard also cites the action of the Philippine Government in 1971 when it decided to return the Tasaday:

who had just been discovered in the depths of the jungle, where they had lived for eight centuries without any contact with the rest of the species, to their primitive state, out of the reach of colonizers, tourists, and ethnologists. **This at the suggestion of the anthropologists themselves, who were seeing the indigenous people disintegrate immediately upon contact, like mummies in the open air.**

Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Translated by Shiela Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994, pp. 1-42.

*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

*Ibid* p. 7.

**'In order for ethnology to live,' he asserts, 'it's object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being "discovered" and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it.'** The necessary death that must precede science, and art — as in the case of museums and installations — has appeared in discussions of the relationship of historians to archives. **Achille Mbembe for instance, gestures to the necessary death of the author of a document for it to enter the archive and acquire archival value.** Mbembe focuses on the historian's handling of dead and living time, with the archive forming both the original point from which historical time is constructed as well as the sign of death. While Ancestral Goa seems to foreshadow death and caricature life, the museum of agricultural tools seems to have trapped a sense of time that staggers between past and present. In contrast, the fiberglass figures of peasant couples tilling the land in the tableaux presented at Ancestral Goa, an installation mentioned at the beginning of this essay, disappoints not only because it does not fulfil the expectations of realist art, but also because of its limited and defined denotative possibility. Neither satisfyingly enough authentic, nor differentiated or plastic enough to absorb meanings of the past that proliferate, it attempts to isolate and fix tradition with a rigidity usually associated with state exhibits.

In contrast, the domain of the past as an online phenomenon in Goa is now suffused with memories, memoirs, images, and an ongoing archiving of the present. The archiving of the present has often been viewed as a way of escaping the disciplinary strictures of history, a reclaiming of the right by everyone to be an everyday historian, so that archiving ceases to produce a collection whose order and dimensions are fixed once done. In fact, the notion of temporal separation has vanished to such a degree that archiving constitutes the placement of texts or objects in a sequence whose logic is always open to the possibility of change. As suggested earlier, this would presume that the prior categories denoting history and tradition with which anyone approaches this activity dissolve in the face of the potential of the technology. Nostalgia however, can make a fetish out of attaching fixed and unchanging meanings to texts. It can and does sometimes thwart the supposed plasticity of archiving online.

Ibid p. 7.

Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', in *Refiguring the Archive* edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh, 2002, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, South Africa.

It may be more useful to think about the experience of the archive in India, which is still constituted primarily by the physical state-owned archive, as having two overlapping attributes. The first is the fact of political control, as the arch-archive, the National Archives in Delhi, continues to be formed in the present only by those documents that the Home Ministry allows to pass into the public domain. While the National Archives over and above other state archives is overwritten by its continuing expansion and control by government ministries, its housing of documents of the colonial state constitutes the second attribute of the official archive — its value as legacy, past and tradition. **Achille Mbembe's 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', emphasizes that the status of the archival document is always linked to rituals that govern its production and reception, rituals of secrecy, control and the sense of time past and present that the archival document encases.** Mbembe also notes that the primary status of the archival document is that of its materiality, that it must be touched and seen as evidence that something happened; that there was a life that produced the document and an event whose existence it secures. In most discussions of the archive, including the South African context, the material fragility of the archive does not inflect descriptions of our sensory attachment to archives. In India, the values of tradition and legacy that attach to the archive are infused with the imminent knowledge of its physical disappearance. It is this unavoidable fact about the weather and the workings of the Indian state that leads us in fact to see in the Internet, a site for salvation.

The handling of documents remains a mundane event in most archives in India — pages can be flipped roughly enough, books thumped and files stacked in dust without evoking a sense of blasphemy or outrage in user or holder. In fact, the degrees of separation between the mundane handling of archives and the immense value attached to them, forms the bulk of the informal stories historians tell about archives. For this reason, we could draw a distinction between discussions of the archive that have arisen in the contexts of more successful state machineries,

whether South Africa or Germany and that of India. **Walter Benjamin's 'Unpacking my Library' speaks of the disappearance of the individual collector, and the possibilities of disorder that the unarranged library presents.** In contrast, if one were to hear historians of India regale each other with tragicomic experiences of dealing with unarranged archives, and gaining access to precious collections, soon to fall to pieces after they use them, it is apparent that it would be possible to run a newspaper column for at least a year on the stories we hear of precious finds and brilliant librarians, as well as the more macabre ones of how they gained access to records against all odds, or the tales of the state in which we find documents, and their likely condition after we are done with them. Among the fraternity of historians therefore, the discussion around archives can begin and end with a bemoaning of the state of the archives, a sense of mourning for imminent and continuing cultural loss.

If we were to consider this as a continuing story about state power and archives, then we could say that the form of the state that the historian most often encounters is not the state that censors documents before they enter the archive, but the bureaucratic offices in which demands for maps may be arbitrarily refused or *granted*, where women researchers may be refused obscene texts and where offices shut early and texts are lost. **The phrase 'Banality of power', of Mbembe's coinage should have been the most appropriate characterization for this phenomenon.**

However, Mbembe's article which draws strongly from Bakhtinian conceptions of power and resistance in their carnivalesque excesses does not address itself to what is an exercise of power that inverts the carnivalesque. There is an absurdity about the scale of historians' testimonies and witness to the difficulties of archival access — a historian describes her anxiety over documents that may be burnt by the fires of a reverential *aarti* performed close to old papers in the archives in Chennai, another dries rain soaked documents in the sun in the courtyard of an archive in Assam, after having purchased a tubelight to investigate the dark interiors of the storehouse and a cat falls through the thermocol roof of one archive, onto the papers below. This constitutes the daily exercise of power that substantively affects the material status

Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt ed., Harry Zohn trans., Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp. 59-68.

Achille Mbembe, 'The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony', translated by Janet Roitman, *Public Culture*, Vol.4, No.2: Spring1992

of the archive, even as the handling of the document by the historian constitutes another pole of sensory experience. The necessary confrontation with this form of power forces one to wonder whether there is not a need to consider this in its own right as the workings of the outposts of the state, as opposed to the Centre. If the ruling order hides or destroys the files from the Emergency of 1975, the outposts of the state are as powerful an obfuscatory force. The dilemma of the historian does not lie only in her holding that portentous knowledge about the material demise of the archives, but also in the ability to keep walking away from that trove of documents of whose historical worth she may know the most.

The mundaneness of material engagement with the archive stands in contrast to monumental state power. We also encounter the state in its mundane immovability in libraries that appear around the sign of the 'public' rather than that of the nation. Mbembe points suggestively to how the archival document is the initial point from which the historian constructs time as a totality, as a spectre around which she constructs other historical entities. Between the public document and the citizen user, it is the spectre of democracy that is summoned each time a potentially threatening document is asked for in the name of public rights. **The Right to Information (RTI) Act is the most recent legislative decision to alter the nature of publicity associated with documents and information.** Though the archive is not seen as the customary target for the Act, its existence has made its mark on all public institutions and repositories. The Act works as a mirror to present to the state information extracted from the state, and it produces the spectre of democracy each time it is invoked by a citizen.

Of much less dramatic value is the public library, an institution created as a point of access for state bulletins and newspapers, and often, incidentally, valuable historical material. In contrast to the archive, the public library has a benign aspect. Far from summoning a dark challenge to the state's sovereignty, or contributing to a monumental tradition, its semantic weight rests on the side of the ordinary; it denotes power of a municipal kind, a library that houses newspapers and children's

<http://rti.gov.in/>. While this site suggests that the Act is an initiative of the Government of India, it is well known that various movements for the freedom of information led to the contentious framing of this Act.

reading rooms, the meeting place of the educated unemployed and the amateur historian. The public library, like the official in a regional state archive, manoeuvres a domesticated state power.

This suggests to us however, that exercise of mundane or monumental power is not determined by the contents of the institution, for national archives and public libraries may both have historical texts, legal documents and public information. Monumental power is summoned through the statutes that create libraries and archives, but also, interestingly, in the tactics employed by users. **Two recently completed PhD theses, those of Maya Dodd and Bhavani Raman, have interesting things to say about questions connected to this. The first, Dodd's 'Archives of Democracy' examines 'technologies of witness' oral testimony and the staging of democracy during and after the Emergency of 1975 in India, while Raman studies the place of writing as a technology of power in colonial Tamil Nadu.** Raman demonstrates how the promise of bearing true witness, or of being an accurate record, or proof of truth, came to be attached to the official document. Dodd's thesis interestingly suggests that the spectre of democracy summoned by the RTI is pacified through judicial symbolism. The demand made to the state, Dodd argues, is also the gesture that restores the state to its position of power as the dispenser of justice. At the archive official's desk, and among the stacks, the highly varying values attached to writing, history and official documents in India are only too visible. The charged significance that official paper has at the centre of the document Raj that Bhavani Raman describes potentially dissipates in the hands of the stacker and the handler of manuscripts by the time they reach the archives. On occasion the reverse is true — the outpost guards the secrecy of the document far more fiercely than the centre. The movement from the centre of power to its outposts is marked as much by a changed relationship to the materiality of documents as to their potential meanings. In contrast, the Internet as the new blazing sign of public access and a vehicle for an online archive exactly embodies the greatest fear of the monumental state — loss of cultural control and secrecy. It also promises an unbelievable deliverance for tropical countries without air-conditioned archives — the promise that data will last forever.

Maya Dodd, 'Archives of Democracy: Technologies of Witness in Literatures on Indian Democracy since 1975', Dissertation, Program of Modern Thought and Literature, 2006.  
Bhavani Raman, 'Introduction - The Document Raj: Writing, Scribes, And Company Rule In Madras', in "Document Raj: Scribes and Writing in Company Rule Madras, 1780-1860" Dissertation submitted to the University of Michigan, 2007.

It would appear that the Internet moulds itself so easily to the contours of the state that it should caution us against reading the technology as inherently subversive of individual control and authorship. In fact, instead of invoking the Internet or individual users as independent entities, it may be more appropriate to see gestures to the state to release documents, whether for research or political activism, as acts that evoke different kinds of state power. **There have been several arguments in favour of considering state power as a disaggregated instead of monolithic or monumental force.** In a postcolonial context, this question also has to address the different formation of the various functions and relations to the state that the colonial situation produced. **The disparity in the conception or claims of the state and its actual functioning in postcolonial India have been commented on by Jon E Wilson to argue that both the idea of an ideal conception and what is seen as a mismanaged implementation are the product of colonial dispositions and approaches towards deciphering a strategy for colonial rule.** The malfunctioning of the state, the article seems to argue, is a manifestation of the collision with prevailing power structures and conflicts when they collide with the unworkable template of governance, put in place by British colonial officials, anxious to create a distanced, simple and controllable set of precepts through which to govern. The fact that the precedents already in place to govern political and economic structures like land for instance, would inevitably collide with the abstractions, through which the colonial state was framed, was covered over by colonial and postcolonial interpretations that saw state and society as corrupt and chaotic.

**This and other attempts to re-read the monolithic character of state power suggest that rather than seeing the sometimes ridiculous or tortuous encounter with public institutions in India only as evidence of a failed bureaucracy, the archive at its most petty can be seen as a rewriting of a primary text of power located at the centre.** Questions of ownership, rights of access, and accountability of archival structures are rewritten at the desks and counters of the archive, the most frequent point of contact with the historian-public.

For instance, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.

Jon E Wilson, 'The Domination of Strangers: Time, Emotion and the Making of the Modern State in Colonial India', *Economic & Political Weekly* July 23, 2011, Vol xlii, No 30.

De Certeau.

This also speaks to the discussion in Dodd's thesis around the RTI, which, in revealing to the state its own perfidy, also summons it like a spirit in all its plenitude in the demand for the exercise of democracy. As opposed to the RTI, which summons the written text, or the ruling order, or the centre of governmentality, is there a difference in the kind of state evoked by everyman in the everyday? As a fellow researcher I interviewed officials at one of the prominent national archives, I found it difficult to prise even an official publication catalogue for the bookshop out of the hands of an official, because the release of either speech or paper may elicit a memo from superiors. In sharp contrast, the Delhi State Archives embodied the mundane from the lack of lawn and magisterial steps to enter the building, to the ease of entry and access to documents. For a hundred rupees, we were able to purchase images of maps of the North West border that the National Archives may not have shown us at all. Other public libraries however, are not immune from being the place from which strategic power is deployed. Those that house texts that embody a national tradition reproduce the logic of the national archive, irrespective of their other attributes. In other instances however, the state archive can also be found dispensing land documents on payment of Rs. 25 to numerous users in the course of a day, transforming itself, in this act alone, into a municipal outpost of the state instead of its centre. **This is why de Michel de Certeau's or Foucauldian formulations of enunciation as event or as tactic help decipher the avatars of the archive.** If we see in the head librarian or government functionary at the entrance of the archive an embodiment of de Certeau's 'ordinary man' acting out a master text, we could see differing versions of the state called into being by different uses of the archive. This allows us to see why, in contrast to the everyday grind of working in the archive, the applicant under the RTI Act and the political historian of emergency dramatically summon a strategic state as they press upon the centre's need to withhold secrecy and knowledge. Yet, allayed by the filling out of forms, the seeking of permission, the production of credentials, the strategic state disappears and the historian is left at the counter to discover the state anew in the diminutive figure of the ordinary man, the torn document, and the missing file.

De Certeau, 'A Very Ordinary Culture' and "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics", in *The Practice of Everyday Life, The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 28-42.

29

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81

## CHAPTER TWO:

### *LAND AND THE UNSTABLE DOCUMENT*

Land documents and maps may confer a sense of belonging when they appear on a nostalgia site. In the context of land conflict however, these acquire a different life. While one may expect that they work as proof in courts of law, this study of contemporary land conflict in Goa shows that the status of the document is entirely uncertain. This may be because of the kind of power exercised by the state in Goa. The gap between the state when it acts as a legal state, appearing in the form of the judge, the case file, and the rulebook, and the state when it flouts its own laws using violent means, destabilizes the document. No piece of paper can stand in for the truth when it is in fact negated simultaneously through physical action. A further section therefore, suggests that an online land document also does not alter this status. The Internet can however, generate kinds of publicity and forms of community that alter the nature of conflict.

In situations where the primary use of the Internet is to facilitate access, any critical engagement with the question of technology or state power is suspended. The enveloping of technology within the discourse of development blunts the critical abilities that we may otherwise see deployed around questions of agricultural tradition or the legality of documents. In fact only the conservative librarian, unwilling to release a legacy of texts to the public, has a position of resistance towards the Internet.

If the museum of agricultural implements (discussed in the introduction) in Goa were to be more widely frequented, it would strike a chord with most Goans, as it is a remarkable reaction among a proliferating range, to a feeling of malaise about the way the relation of people to land has changed. It is possible to see the museum as a single stroke against the combined perception of loss, misuse or misappropriation relating to the land and its resources, which its people could formerly take for

granted. The fertility of the soil, the knowledge of water, the accumulated familiarity with plants, trees, festival and crop patterns are only some aspects of the many ways in which those who inhabit the land find their basic survival being wrested from them. A small part of this has to do with the voluntary sale of land in Goa. While different groups for different reasons voice anti-outsider sentiments, the sale of land for profit is one impetus for alarm over the entry of outsiders into once intact villages. While the atrocities inflicted by mining activities and SEZ (Special Economic Zone) regulations form a more important part of this anxiety to preserve a passing landscape and culture, Victor Hugo Gomes' museum also implicates Goans for allowing the dissipation of land and its artefacts.

This is not without its complications. For the move for restoration of a way of life invariably leads to questions of ownership, possession, rights that are moral, ethical and legal. If the museum embodies an aesthetic and historicising response to crisis, there are other manifestations of disquiet. **The Goan Gaunkary Movement, with which the curator has sympathies, seeks to strengthen and assert what it sees as original forms of land ownership in Goa, the comunidade or gaunkaria system, whereby land is communally administered by a hereditarily appointed group of male members representing groups of families from each neighbourhood of the village.** The comunidade is a functioning system today, is a legal, social and cultural entity, but has seen its economic role much diminished over time. Its economic and legal roles were most severely marginalized however, with the handover of Goa to the Indian state and the introduction of the panchayat system. Though those sympathetic to the movement would deny that this a facet of the movement, it is justifiable, I think, to anticipate that were the movement to grow, it would bring into conflict castes that are seen to be dominant within the comunidades, and those left out, old migrants to villages and newer ones, those who have always owned property, and those who recently bought it, etc.

A strand within this overall argument tries to emphasize the principle of natural law, embedded in Portuguese law, on which it claims the comunidade system is based

— on co-management rather than ownership. For the notion of private property, according to this, is alien to natural law which sees God as the owner of land and human beings as its caretakers. This defense which emphasizes the responsibility and duties of cultivators and *gaunkars* hopes to bind all together within the notion of belonging to an original village and making agriculture a sustainable activity again, for in this, according to them, lies the possibility of both a renewal of natural resources as well as a legal and political restitution of the state to a condition of self-sufficiency that the Gaunkary movement imagines is the past of Goa.

This detailing of the questions around land is intended as a demonstration of how movements, agitations and litigation are held within a matrix of documents and moments of varying legality and weight; texts that impinge on each other's meaning and political significance within the ongoing movement. This is predominantly an attempt to map these varying positions, their status within a world of legal battles and political movements. It also inquires into what would happen at each stage, were all the documents that determine belonging, possession and ownership, to be made publicly accessible online. What kinds of publicity does the Internet make possible in relation to documents and their communities?

There is one large and unwieldy question in Goa that brings state archives, secretariat records, legal documents, comunidade maps and questions of tradition into conflict. The many disputes over the right to land in Goa brings people into the state archives in Panjim, into the *Mamlatdar's* office in Mapusa, and into contact with notaries to have Portuguese documents translated into English. Contemporary conflict over land in many parts of India, not just Goa, combines issues of land ownership, legal documents and digital technology in ways that makes it compelling to watch the kind of political and public space created by changing forms of circulation and dissemination. If we trace how effectively a document has worked as evidence of injustice or as a verifier of truth in the midst of political or legal battles over land, we are led to doubt the apparently inherent democratic promise of digital technology. While digital technology makes information cheaply available,

it is sometimes irrelevant whether documents have a public presence in this form, because the battle over whether a piece of land is for agricultural or residential use, *comunidade* land or private, for mining or for waterways, is decided elsewhere. The document (whether digitized or not), is the last of the signs that indicate that land use in Goa has changed.

Digital access to records implies a fulfillment of democracy in a technical sense and the availability of records online would unquestionably ease the work of citizens trudging from one government office to another to extract papers. However, other processes of conflict decide the political significance of a particular document and of the kind of public among which it circulates. Instead of viewing the Internet as a tool of dissemination therefore, this study examines how the particular changes in public life brought about by Internet technology alter the relation of a society to the archive. A visible sphere of publicity generated by the net is the one developed around land disputes – the concern around the rights, history and fate of the village *comunidade*, seen as both a traditional Goan institution and a legal administrative entity, backed by documentation and maps that exist in local villages and the state archive.

Housed in the crumbling '*chaudi*' offices in each village, the *comunidade* still runs on an almost honorary basis, a frugal economy, sustained by the political interest of active members. For the migrant Goan *gaunkar*, visiting the *comunidade* office when back in Goa, is both a reassertion of rights or membership in village property, as well as an act of nostalgia. There are more material reasons too. Potentially massive monetary transactions and political corruption has created an underlying pressure that prompts current conversations about the *comunidade*. The spiraling real estate in Goa has made land 'the new gold', as many of those whom I speak to reiterate. If the legal and economic structure of the *comunidade* was indeed not based on the concept of private property, as many of the arguments outlined below will suggest, that basic concept is now under greater pressure than ever before.



land administration that was *not* founded on the notion of private property. It is this aspect that is now invoked as traditional, original and pure of any interest in profit maximization.

Yet, as I speak to some members of a village comunidade who are involved in trying to strengthen its position as the original *administrator* (as opposed to, but often implying, owner) of all village land, it is obvious that their task is not easily achieved. For in each village, even if we imagine a time without the scale of migration we see today, there were those who were original members of the comunidade and those who were not. Revisiting the original form of the comunidade now implies questioning the legal status of all those who have bought the land at any time in the past and who now assume the rights of private ownership which the comunidade contests. Such a conflict involves the production and the questioning of the status of documents, records and historical facts for their meaning and their political weight, to argue the legitimacy of one institution over another. This is an impossible political programme. All the same, it is this sort of dispute that makes visible the unstable nature of the document as historical evidence, as legal evidence, or as popular truth.

Any opponent of mining in Goa, or of beach front hotel resorts or merely of a usurping panchayat, at some point must deal with the legal categories and documents around land. In the case of disputes around land that is, or was held by village level comunidades or *gaunkarias*, there is not even a stable or singular legal meaning attached to the range of documents that circulate among the competing authorities and parties. In fact, tracing the life and path of the different legal documents that are necessary to argue a case involving comunidade land involves a tangle of authorities, repositories and disputing groups. Unsurprisingly then, movements that are pitted against the state or the multinational entities it supports must use various forms of political power. Dominant media representations would divide these on the basis on the kind of power employed: into movements that participate in the formal exercise of power through law, regulation, and

systematization, and the exercise of power through non-legal and non-state entities and means. This diverse approach to the state cannot be explained without examining the state's own practice, for it is the state, owing to its widely perceived illegitimacy that typically engages in two forms of political representation – the one consolidating its use of governmentality through law, and the other affecting its sovereignty through a substantive exercise and demonstration of power. The appearance of legality and the lacing through of all political processes with due procedure and documents is important to sustain some measure of governmentality, while the domain of substantive politics requires that rule be maintained for instance, through cooption, or if needed, overt coercion and expropriation. The two domains are not disconnected. The success of the state lies in its ability to negotiate both these forms of power, allowing it to insert itself into dominant global currents in politics and economy, while keeping its house in order at home. This essay suggests that the unstable status of the document as the proof of truth and evidence in legal and political conflicts is produced by the gap between forms of rule. In as far as both the state and its opponents use both legal and extra-legal mechanisms to exercise power, and adopt legally recognized and other identities to invoke diverse collectivities and powers, the document, whether digitized or not, does not have a stable function.

With the contours of a public sphere continuously in formation and dissolution, the notion of transparent governance as widely advertised by the state is in fact a reduction of the use of Internet technology to its most basic function – providing information without altering the nature of power. To be able to locate exactly how Internet technology could potentially transform or merely combine with prevalent forms of communication, it is necessary to trace firstly, how different kinds of documents acquire both varying meanings and fluctuating legal weight within a situation of conflict. Questions of land in Goa or elsewhere however, also invariably bring into circulation different institutions and documents that are linked by the thread of litigation into a pattern that can sustain a claim, complaint or charge. The following elaboration of some disputes between institutions governing land in Goa

are necessary to see why the archive plays a role in these disputes, and how the status of evidence, truth and proof is conferred on papers issued from different offices.

## CONTESTING LEGALITIES, TWO COLONIAL STATES

To return to the comunidade office, the president of one of the two comunidades in the village of Aldona stated, 'It's all about the 1 by 14 form'. The 1/14 form, whose legal significance this comunidade has been fighting, is in fact a *lease* document, 'but is being used as a document of *ownership* in courts', according to the President. **'All of Aldona is comunidade land', he claims, and 'the Panchayat', in as far as it claims to adjudicate on land issues, 'is illegal', he says.** If I read the form, he asserts, I would find that the land was leased, for example, to the church. The church however, is not the owner. Nor, he says, is the comunidade the owner, for, to repeat something I heard often, the comunidade is not governed by the principle of private property.

The fraught relationship of the panchayat to the comunidade is interesting enough for elaboration. The President insists that the panchayat should properly be run from the comunidade offices. To understand how these two entities are pitted against each other, is also to understand how two kinds of authorities, legalities and states have clashed, or rather, trodden over each other, particularly after the liberation of Goa in 1961. It is commonly understood that the panchayat has the right and responsibility to take up questions affecting the welfare of the village, to collect revenue, to run elections, to file cases, to represent village interests. The President explains however, that while the panchayat has the authority to take up issues, even according to the panchayat's own norms of functioning, and according to modern law, the comunidade, as the 'original owners' of village land, have to be included in approving sales and projects and have to issue a No Objection certificate which is being disregarded these days. It is evident from this conversation that the comunidade is now being politically disregarded in this debate. It is still however, a perfectly legal, recognised and functioning entity.

Interview with anonymous  
member of a comunidade.

## ONLINE MOBILIZATIONS, DOUBTFUL DOCUMENTS

The diminished legality of the *comunidade* is now being traced back to the point of liberation, with the introduction of economic and legal structures that opponents have begun to term as British in opposition to the Portuguese. The *comunidade* members assert that in the decades after liberation, the panchayat used to hand over 1/6th of land revenues to the *comunidade*, but that has now stopped.

As the supporters of the *comunidade* try and explain to me the values attaching to legal terms used under that system, a different legal structure comes into view. 'If you see the document by which the church holds land in this village', they explain, 'you'll see that it has a lifetime or ninety-nine year lease. That means the church has usufruct of the land, but it cannot sell. The term, *Aforamento* means you cannot sell. You can have it for ninety-nine years'. The archives of Goa hold some significance for this particular opposition to the panchayat, for the pre-liberation records validate *comunidade* claims. There is another set of records which sustains the reality of the *comunidade*, and this is the maps that lie with each *comunidade* office. When asked if these are public documents, the members assert that while these are in a sense public, 'there is no reason why anyone but a *gaunkar* of Aldona should be able to see the *gaunkar* records'. What unfolds in the ensuing discussions with a range of people is that what we have in view today is an overlapping of two systems. The entry of Indian law into Goa after 1961 brought a hasty and scrambled blanket of what Goans see as 'British-Indian' laws thrown over a prevailing legal system that was not nullified or discredited. It simply generated a process of uncomfortable and hiccupping compromise, until current land politics brought differences sharply into opposition.

In the light of the previous argument about the structure of politics and the state, one should emphasize that the gap between law and substantive politics is not one that divides the state and people, but are conflicting templates in which politics plays itself out. One strand of land politics in Goa therefore, pits the organization of rights inherent in the idea of the *comunidade* (now seen as a non-state legal

structure) against those based on the exclusive principle of private ownership inaugurated as a formal practice of state by the British. Those who see themselves as disprivileged by the *comunidade* system (often but not always, lower caste groups) however, would call on substantive politics and law to wrest power within both *comunidade* and *panchayat*, in combat with those aspects within both structures that are seen to conceal and legitimize oppression. The sphere of the document and legality is however, revisited over and over by those who believe they have a legitimate claim in the hope that it will do one of a range of things: occasionally deliver justice, usually infuse an ongoing political tussle with another kind of power, sometimes function as a further stage for the production of disprivileged identities, or delay the impact of extra-legal forms of oppression. There have even been questions about why women still don't have the right to be counted as *comunidade* members.

Maya Dodd in a recently submitted dissertation traces the relay effect of representative politics, suggesting that the charge and the claim of effecting democracy circulate from one domain of testimonial production to another through different kinds of texts. **She states, 'So while I am arguing for the fact that public interest litigation...served as heavily symbolic dialogue to making the state more responsive to subaltern issues, it is interesting to note that the subaltern classes seek and receive exemption from such judicial symbolism.'** This argument follows from her earlier pungent observation about the public struggles against the state for social justice after the emergency of 1975: 'there were no consequences to the production of truth'. This study examines the process of democratic dissent as if it were a technology, and observes that, 'It is interesting that seldom does the state's hearing of complaint

Ibid.

Maya Dodd, 'Archives of Democracy: Technologies of Witness in Literatures on Indian Democracy since 1975', Dissertation, Program of Modern Thought and Literature, 2006, p. 124.

Ibid p. 107

produce action, but in the instance of airing the grievance there is a perception of democratic practice that I argue grants the state renewed legitimacy.’ Such a view of democratic practice incorporates both publicly circulated newsprint, the citizen’s report and Internet technology as so many technologies that are indistinguishable because they are contained by a politics that has a locus of power elsewhere. **While Bhavani Raman in a study of the place of the record in colonial Tamil Nadu emphasizes the process by which paper documents became the material fabric on which a regime of evidence, accusation and truth was sustained, Dodd’s thesis seems to ask for a qualification of any optimism vested in subversive politics that rest on the same regime.**

Bhavani Raman, ‘Introduction - The Document Raj: Writing, Scribes, And Company Rule In Madras’, in “Document Raj: Scribes and Writing in Company Rule Madras, 1780-1860” Dissertation submitted to the University of Michigan, 2007.

If we take into account protests around these land issues in Goa that use the Internet, would this be anything more than an extension of the processes described in the two theses? Two modes of mobilization via the Internet may be considered here. **A Power Point presentation prepared by a group of professionals in Goa contested the government’s initial Regional Plan, which intended to sell vast tracts of land to builders.** This was circulated widely as the basis on which to mobilize (successfully) sufficient numbers to force the government to reckon with the opposition. In this case, not only was the regional plan temporarily abandoned, but the panchayats were also activated and the gram sabhas are now often volatile meetings with members calling the panchayats to account.

[http://savegoa.com/gba/regional\\_plan/](http://savegoa.com/gba/regional_plan/) - accessed August 11, 2011.

In contrast, the minutes of a recent meeting held by the gram sabha of the village of Moira is a vociferous declaration of a vision for the village to stay a village, and invokes the continued involvement of those who were at the meeting. This cohesion achieved in the village of Moira was not only via a public mobilized through the

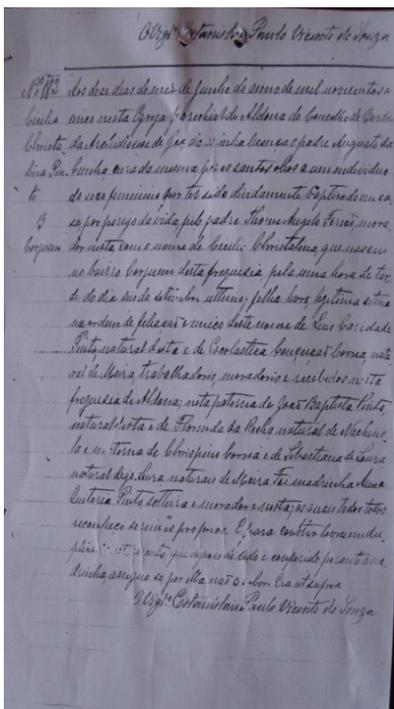
net, as is well known to those who were clued in to this corner of local politics in Goa. It was preceded by a series of meetings in at least one of which a member was roughed up by opposing members, allegedly arranged so that the business of the meeting could proceed without her interference. This was a political unity constituted therefore through substantive political mobilization, moving eventually into the domain of the state. The decline in the wider and more professionalized Goa Bachao Abhiyan, which had in fact initiated some of the processes that resulted in the Moira meeting, is also a sign of the ephemerality of mobilizations under the abstract identity of the citizen.

The production of documents, evidence and testimony, now in full public view on the net can be seen as an additional visible staging of the processes of democracy because the destabilizing or establishment of political power happens elsewhere. It is not that this realm of representation is unimportant, for it has to be accounted for, papered over and guarded. But its impact is neutralized by the other ways in which political subjects are constituted, which are not about addressing neutral citizens.

This has always been the status of the document even in the time of the pre-Liberation colonial state. The reason why the Goan Gaunkary Movement, despite its currently negligible political significance is interesting is that the political order it wants to restore is emblemized through archival records, as well as contemporary land records and ideas about technology mentioned in the introduction. Though the movement refers to the antiquity of the documents that prove the nature of land administration in Goa, those documents have always been challenged for their authenticity and legitimacy. **From the nineteenth century on at least, the 'original inhabitant' status of comunidade members has been vociferously challenged.** Sudra and other caste groups have protested their exclusion or their restricted status as dividend holders of the comunidade, in order to claim membership. Closer to the present, Goans who migrated elsewhere in search of jobs returned with sufficient money to reverse their economic position in the village. Further, into the present, there have been migrations of people from other parts of India. The

current articulations of the Goan Gaunkary Movement stand to threaten all these interests with their focus on the rights of the original comunidade members. The comunidade records can prove these rights historically, but, as said before, the legitimacy of these particular records have long been undermined. Internet technology has added another dimension to village-level activism. An original but now expatriate Aldonkar or Moirekar (from the village Moira) may no longer be able to participate in the gram sabha meeting, but given the frequent movements to and from Goa, and the extended familial contacts, the possibility of solidarity can bring benefits of expert opinion, information gathering, and monetary contributions for movements on the ground.

Rather than seeing the Internet as the last point of transition from earlier forms of community or technology, we can see that it also loops back into these processes. Frederick Noronha, online journalist and campaigner for open access to publications and information affirms that not just political formations, but technologies such as the printed book, a formerly elite product in Goa is now cheaper to produce and distribute thanks to publicity via the Internet. If there is a significant kind of citizenship produced by this technology, it is the nostalgic 'netizen' embodied in the expat Goan, who has extended her/his outpouring of memory and nostalgia from print to the net, and is now able to further recover individual histories of migration, contact, expulsion, and further trace genealogies of historically momentous families and long-lost cousins. Noronha's point is that internet technology has in fact enabled the circulation of print in Goa which always suffered from small markets. It may well be easier to generate a reading public that extends beyond the elite with digital technology enabling cheap publishing, and the internet furnishing a reader for instance, for the low price publications by local authors that he seeks to promote.



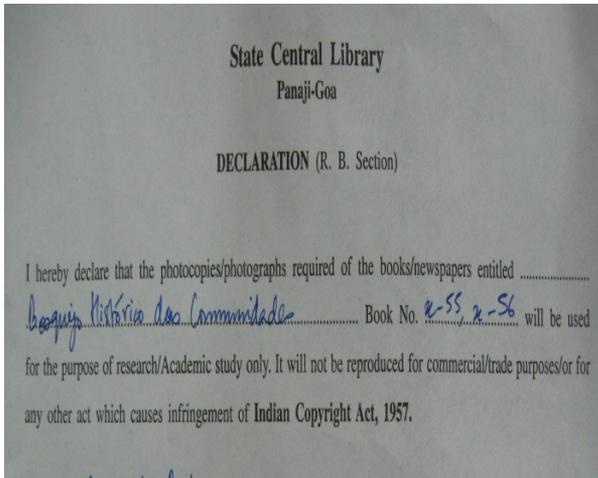
## A RIGHT TO DOCUMENTS

The Internet clearly has a diminished role in the ambit of land conflicts and the circulation of land documents. The one other question that remained was of how the capacity of the Internet to allow access to objects and data that were once not for public circulation, is addressed by archivists and librarians. In a situation where all state departments, by directive, pronounce that they are transparent and have plans for digitization, what space remains for the use of digital technology, that is not already spoken for by the state?

Blossom Medeira, the current archivist of the Directorate of Archaeology and Archives of Goa is refreshingly knowledgeable. When asked the pivotal question of this project – would the uploading of ‘public’ documents from the archives be an issue, she replies that in fact, since these are issued to the public anyway, it would not be. Centralised edicts urging all government departments to demonstrate the dual desirable aims of being transparent and technologically advanced has meant that almost all departments have plans for digitization that are partially implemented or are on the verge of implementation. While an infinite number of years may pass before documents are actually digitized, catalogued and circulated, each state institution will always, from now on, have plans towards it. These plans sometimes lack financial backing, trained personnel, or are simply caught in the usual bind of money not being released or utilized

by the branches of government. Since technological transparency is now a state and not an oppositional claim, it is left to ascertain what kind of space is offered by the use of digital technology that is not already proffered by the state.

The Goa archives, as with State archives in other parts of the country, discussed elsewhere, deals with visitors through a dual approach. The archives are, on the one hand, seen as the repository of historical traces, with the state as guardian. As a researcher therefore, I need to furnish a letter, usually with institutional credentials, stating my interests and intentions. However, on an average, 50 users a day walk into the archives for a specific set of documents: birth, death and land records. These are citizens, in need of legal documents to supplement claims, complaints and disputes.

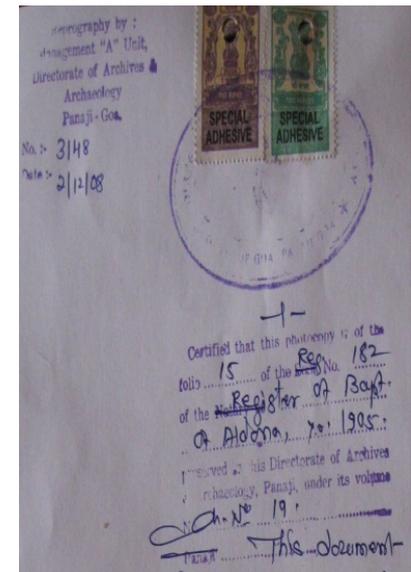


The position of the archivist general in Goa is an interesting one. Medeira not only displays an overall knowledge of the nature of documents required to lay a claim to land, but has an acute enough grasp of the mentalities involved in the constant search underway in the archive. She says for instance, that with the rise in the value of land, people are anxious in any case to have the value and legal titles to land ascertained. These documents will not, however, prove ownership. She too explains that the comunidade is not based on ownership. It is in keeping with the argument about substantive politics made earlier however, that the meaning of a document is transformed absolutely by political will.

The notaries and translators unofficially accompanying those who can pay them are a repository in themselves of stories about the kinds of situations that require a dredging of records. Builders for instance must depute people to trace a clear record to acquire land. Litigious families trace claims to buttress their cases and those who intend to sell want a clear record in place.

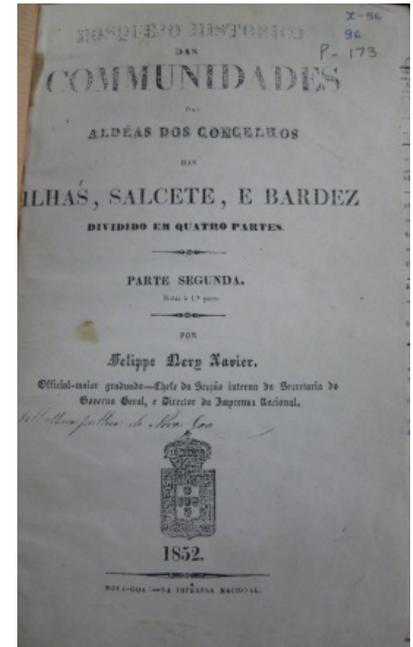
In fact, servicing the needs of researchers is only a fraction of the work of the archival staff and the archivist general who virtually stand in as quasi advisors and a para-legal advisory team to those who have no idea what kind of legal documents are required and who holds them. How would I begin a search for land documents if had the name of a village, a parent or a plot number? The archivist says the search usually begins with the land survey department, which holds the new land survey and old survey numbers. This will then require a perusal of the cadestral record which has a detailed description of the plot, its features and limits. Those without a plot number must begin their search in the village or personal index for details that can then be used as a legal document. Alternatively, there may be an inventory of their ancestor's moveable and immoveable assets or documents signed by the former *escritores* or scribes in each village legalizing gift deeds, sales deeds and partition deeds in which the place of the plot and the year of the deed is mentioned. Some of these records are stored in the sub-registrar's office in Mapusa, which holds birth certificates, death and marriage records and surviving baptismal records upto 1913.

Having all these online would not necessarily help this process beyond a point, the archivist emphasizes, as the necessity of the records within the legal process and the fact that many of these records are in Portuguese would require further interpretation. The notaries of Goa emerge, in this context, as important figures who usually know Portuguese and, for a fee, play the role of legal interpreter at approximately Rs. 25 a folio, to ascertain the legal validity of a document, and as translator at approximately Rs. 300 a page. The translated document holds as a legal document.



There is a thin but well-maintained divide maintained by the archive between those documents that are handed out on a daily basis to litigants and those that are of historical significance. It would be hard to maintain this distinction, were a dispute to involve a village as a collectivity. If we consider the comunidade of Aldona for instance, which split into two along caste lines in the early twentieth century; then one would see that the pamphlets and publications around the event would contribute significantly to any contemporary movement that was initiated today and that needed prior documents to bolster its claim. The pamphlets of the early twentieth century for instance constructed caste histories by drawing on legal evidence that stretched back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, tracing comunidade disputes over the veracity of signatures, the fallibility of rules, and the origin of comunidade regulations. The same set of documents is now split into the historical and the legal domains of the archives, yet none would actually be closed off to a reader. As a historian one could pay for a microfilm of a historical record, and as a layperson, a digital print out of a land record.

When thrust into the role of bureaucracies by litigants, it is possible to see the archives, state library, and the registrar's office in a single continuous line, holding and dispensing legal documents with ease. Numerous people walk in to use the Central Library, Panjim, as a reading room, as they should, to extract photocopies of official announcements from government bulletins, to research school projects, etc. Researchers also frequent this library with holdings of immense historical significance. Yet, if the curator or other authorities are approached by a member of the public to ask if these collections can be made public, there is uncertainty about the authority, legitimacy and legality of releasing these from state control. This dual approach characterizes most state repositories. The same text could be issued as a legal document, but would cause the librarian to shrink with anxiety if asked to put it online. For those who imagine they are guardians of a national legacy, nothing is apparently as threatening as the glaring visibility of seeing a document on the Internet, available easily to a reader. Visibility through the Internet does not have the same value in all political contexts. In some cases, as with the



nostalgia brigade, the Internet forges a compact community across continents, and propels print, a technology that is ordinarily seen to precede it. In other situations, the Internet is an appendage to an already formed notion of citizenship. For those guarding texts within small communities of old elites, the Internet seems to allow in a blasphemously wide public that threatens the contained readership that a paper library still implies. In yet others, it stages citizenship, with the claim of extending its domain. **For instance, the Goan Gaunkary Movement which has extremely few supporters in Goa now has an online presence as well as publications in English and sometimes Konkani, intended for popular circulation.** It claims allegiance to indigenous people's movements worldwide and carries an excerpt from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It therefore, stakes a claim to the position of victimhood by voicing claims of dispossession, historic injustice, and a right to territory and resources, even when these claims could be challenged.

This elaboration of the legalities, political interpretations and tangled meanings of documents around just one land issue in Goa is intended to convey the intricacies that remain to be resolved even as the Internet plays host to a wave of nostalgia, remembrance, research on Diaspora and the internationalized conversation that now takes place around village disputes and Goan culture. **The thrust of recent proceedings of the gram sabha in Moira seems anti-technological in its approach to development (we want to be a village, we do not want to be a suburb of Mapusa) but sees in Internet technology, the transparency that continues to be accorded to media of communication.**

For those at the receiving end of mining technology, the deprivations of modern technology are only too visible. And in villages like Moira that have not yet borne the full impoverishing brunt of big hotels or mining, the question of what is good technology is an internal one and still has the appearance of a choice or a decision that the village can take. For Victor Hugo Gomes however, in as far as we can deduce from his statements and collection, there is certainty about what counts as good technology and what counts as bad. His particular standpoint privileges the hand

<http://www.goancauses.com/gaunkars.htm>  
<http://www.goasu-raj.org/gen/articles/34.asp>  
<http://www.goapluses.com/fullStory.asp?articleID=GOAP8ART727200762706>

10. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moira,\\_Goa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moira,_Goa) - accessed August 11, 2011.

as the necessary part of the human body that must be involved in the production and use of technology – anything that replicates its functions, and negates its involvement, for him signals the onset of bad technology.

For the Gaunkary movement, it is the entry of money as a neutral and removed currency of exchange that has led to the dissolution of the link to land, the dependence on agriculture, and an earlier social structure. The resistance to technology that produces these particular results is shared by the librarian of Goenkarancho Diaz, and that of the Thomas Stephens' Konkani Kendra. Both, along with Gomes, posit a notion of knowledge and culture that refuses a divide between agriculture and printed texts, between orality and writing. The library of Thomas Stevens Konkani Kendra, whose original impetus is the language movement around Konkani in Goa, is surrounded by all the botanical varieties that the current director, Fr. Pratap has been able to lay his hands on. Likewise, the library, Goenkarancho Diaz, one of whose founders, Piedade Morais has been actively involved in the Konkani movement since the seventies was originally begun as a supplement to the movement. Now, the vision outlined for it by Moraes embraces not only the books, but theatre, folk music and eventually, flora and fauna.

Thus, Morais also rues the onset of new technologies: 'With the new generation the whole concept of (a) library has undergone a sea change. In Goa we had to have our own resources for entertainment. Now you press a button...' However, he, along with other language activists and Victor Hugo Gomes are open to digital technology and the transmission of their material through the Internet. The Internet is therefore, not viewed as the endpoint in the trajectory of destructive technology, a button that can be pushed to elicit entertainment, but has been quickly transferred to the position of a transparent receptacle, preserver and disseminator of culture, where the local state library is seen as a destroyer of texts. Only the librarian who guards against releasing a legacy of texts to the public suspects the net. For the rest, the Internet is a seamless and accessible form of publicity. It aligns itself with the range of other technologies, which in 'developing' countries promised progress through dissemination. Amidst



suspicion of modern technology in the form of mining instruments, the logic of capital, the entertainment industry, and fertilizer, the Internet escapes the critical eye through which other manifestations of modern technology have begun to be viewed.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### *HISTORY AND THE REGION: THE COLONIAL ARCHIVE*

#### I

#### INTRODUCTION

Historians obsess about the archive. Theoretical considerations aside, historians from quite different schools of thought and practice are bonded by laments about lost and decaying sources and complaints about inefficient and excessively bureaucratic archival staff. Scholars based in India worry about the condition of archives in different parts of the country, and anxiously look for grants to access better kept collections at the British Library in London, and elsewhere. A few have, in recent years, begun to work on attempting to democratize access to collections that are located abroad [through state sponsored acquisition, or through international digitization projects] and on furthering the possibility of exchanges between archives in India, and those located in private and public repositories in other parts of the world. These developments have largely been separate from scholarly work on the archive. Focusing on the regional archive, this chapter will dwell on both kinds of issues, suggesting also that these are questions that should be considered in totality, rather than relegating one to the sphere of policy, and the other to scholarship.

In recent years, the theoretical and historical literature on the archive has in different ways dispelled or least strongly questioned notions of archives as unbiased holdings of objective facts to be mined by hard working historians. Not unsurprisingly, some of the most influential work of this kind has centered on the official archives of the colonial state in different parts of the formerly colonized world. Focusing on the South Asian context, this chapter calls for the extension of these reflections not merely to other kinds of archives, but also to an issue quite neglected by scholars – the colonial archive in post colonial times. It will discuss the specific instance of the

regional archive in India, in particular the Tamil Nadu Archives located in the city of Chennai. It will situate the Tamil Nadu Archives — the most important repository for documents from the British period in south India — in the present day institutional and political context. In particular, it will consider how state archives delineate the notion of the archival region, a category that in practice cannot contain or explain the complicated and entangled nature of the possessions of these archives. It will end with a brief consideration of the kind of intervention the Internet might constitute in an archive of this sort, and the possible implications of the same for the writing of regional histories, and for thinking about the relationship between institutions like the archive and social memory.

A key figure in the rethinking of the notion of the archive has of course been Michel Foucault. For Foucault, what was important was not the historical archive itself, but the conditions that have made the archive possible. Foucault's archive is the structure, the rules that characterize discursive practice that determines what can be said and what cannot be said. It is the system that governs the appearance of statements as historical events. **Needless to say, while Foucault did not deal with the physical repository of material documents, his insights about the archive as a site of power have influenced the ways in which historians have dealt with, and written about the archive.** Historians widely accept that the archive reveals the ways in which power is articulated, negotiated and even contested and that the collective memories and amnesia of nations and communities are shaped by the archive. If one turns explicitly to the scholarship on South Asia, it becomes apparent that while work that directly focuses on the archive as a theoretical concept is relatively small in number, the recognition of the archive as a site of power has influenced, as we shall see, different strands of history writing, in particular those that deal with South Asia's colonial past.

**Indeed, historians have addressed the issue of the archive, in various ways, and for some time now – certainly well before Derrida made his famous**

**In 1994, the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida gave the archive its place in critical theory. Derrida uses Freudian psychoanalysis to explain the archive as inextricably linked to the authority**

See in particular, Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Oxford: Routledge, 1969.

pronouncements on archive fever. Thus, over the last couple of decades at least, we have seen a spate of critical work by historians from different parts of the world that explore themes that include the consideration of questions of power in the making of different kinds of archives, to that of historical evidence, the practices of history writing, and the formation of collective memories. The truth claims of the archive have been questioned as has the notion of an objective scientific history. Debates about the production of the historical narrative have for one meant there are relatively few takers for positivism within the discipline. This rethinking of the neutrality of the archive has been bolstered by work in the history of science, where scholars like Mary Poovey and Stephen Shapin have looked at the social history of the scientific fact and questions of authority and validation; who determines and what gets accepted as truth?

Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998; Stephen Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Nineteenth Century England*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

The important place of the archive in the determination of historical truth, and what is accepted as history by individuals, communities and nations is one that has exercised scholars in different ways. In his monumental seven volume series on the construction of the French past, Pierre Nora argues that like museums or memorials, archives are “sites of memory”, where

of beginnings, and to the longings for the originary, the primary. Derrida’s archive is not the historian’s documentary archive; instead it is a metaphor that would encompass modern information technology. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

For an overview of the literature on the subject see Francis X Blouin Jr and William G Rosenberg (ed), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997; also Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory”, *Archival Science*, Vol 2, 2002: 1-19.

See in particular, Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973 and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Nora, Pierre, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” *Representations* 26, Spring 1989: 7-25. L. D. Krizman and P. Nora (eds) *Realms of Memory: the construction of the French past*. Vols 1-3. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press: 1996-1998.

**“[cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself.”** In order to understand that the archive does not merely produce an objective narrative of “what happened”, it has become necessary to interrogate or at any rate understand the narrator whether the state, a business corporation or a family. The elision of questions of power in the creation of the archive has been critiqued through case studies that have focused on range of time periods, regions and institutions. **The historian Jacques Le Goff in his work on the relationship between the consolidation of political power by monarchs in the ancient world and the establishment of the earliest archives comments that “ the document is not objective, innocent raw material but expresses past society’s power over memory and over the future: the document is what remains.”** There has also been an increasing focus on those marginalized by the historical archive (and consequently, the search for sources other than those of the state and other dominant institutions). **The feminist scholar, Gerda Lerner for instance has argued that women have been systematically excluded from mainstream historical records from the middle age to the twentieth century.**

Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, Preface, xvii.

Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993

More recent scholarship engages with the issue of historical production in its entirety; what is underlined is not merely what is recorded, and what is not, but the negotiations, contestations and elisions that take place at different moments of retrieval by historians from the archive. One of the most important and moving examples of work that examines the relationship between power and the production of the historical past in the non-western context has been Michel Rolph- Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past*. **Focusing on the Haitian Revolution, the book argues that this**

monumental event has been silenced in western historiography, and that this elision can be traced to every step in its [non] production, from the creation of primary documents to that of the archive, to the writing of historical narratives “History is the fruit of power,” according to Trouillot, and this power is reflected in the “ways in which the production of historical narratives involved the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”

It is not surprising that there has been a focus on the colonial state and its archives in the revisionist literature that focuses on the power of the archive and its relationship to the production of history. The assumptions and biases of the colonial archive and the ways in which it has been organized have been the object of much scrutiny and revealed to be gendered, racist and hierarchical. Above all, this scholarship emphasizes that the colonial archive existed to validate and serve colonial power. In his telling study, Thomas Richards discusses the ways in which the Victorian empire was based on a close relationship between knowledge and power. **Focusing on fields like biology, geology and geography, Richards calls the imperial archive a fantasy of knowledge collected for the service of the empire. Colonial archives, thus, as the anthropologist Ann Stoler has pointed out recently are “both sites of the imaginary and institutions that fashioned histories as they concealed, revealed and reproduced the power of the state. While acknowledging its significance, other recent work has argued that there can be no easy reading of the colonial archive, created as it was by administrators and ideologues at differing levels, and at different points of time, dealing with the everyday work of maintaining order and controlling the subject population. Stoler’s own work for example, has emphasized the shifting, and often complicated nature of colonial ideologies and practices; in her work on the nature of colonial documents in the Dutch East Indies, she argues that the imperial archive was in fact, a confused, and often conflicted with epistemic space.**

Michel - Rolph Trouillot,  
*Silencing the Past: Power and  
the Production of History*,  
Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Thomas Richards, *Imperial  
Archive: Knowledge and the  
Fantasy of Empire*, London:  
Verso, 1993.

See Ann Stoler, “Colonial  
Archives and the Arts of  
Governance”, *Archival Science*,  
Vol 2, 2002, 87-109.

Stoler, *Along the Archival  
Grain: Epistemic Anxieties  
and Colonial Common Sense*,  
Princeton: Princeton University  
Press, 2008.

For its entire obsession with British colonialism, there has been relatively little work in the context of South Asia that directly considers the theoretical status of the colonial archive. Some of the most influential historical scholarship on South Asia was witness to a fruitful dialogue between history and anthropology, with the archive frequently being invoked. However, this invocation was, for the most part to underline the perfidiousness of the colonial archive, to reveal its elitism and its treachery in silencing the voice of the subaltern. Thus, in the 1980s and early 90s, members of the early Subaltern School urged historians to actively read “against the grain” in order to recover the voices of peasant rebels from the colonial archive. Here, subalternity is understood as residing within elite discourses and not outside it. **Subaltern historians, therefore read colonial records in ways that allowed them to recover the myths, ideologies and resistance of the subaltern that traditional historiography, whether nationalist or colonialist had erased from its narratives. Thus, Ranajit Guha in the “Prose of Counter Insurgency” articulates his famous structuralist reading of the corpus of literature on peasant insurgency and argues that peasant consciousness is completely absent at different levels of discourse surrounding peasant rebellion, from colonial records produced in the aftermath of an event, to different schools of secondary historical literature on these incidents.**

See Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* for its compelling arguments for “a politics of knowledge that deal with archival genres, cultures of documentation, fictions of access, and archival conventions”, *Colonial Archives and Arts of Governance*, 87-88.

In this project to recover subaltern agency, there is little interest in the specific historical nature of the state and its archive, it exists only in its biases that the historian needs to comprehend and contest. **In work of this kind, the idea is not to, as Stoler recommends, reading the archive “along” its grain to historically understand its structures of meaning.** For some subalternists, one way of addressing this elision is to read colonial records alongside other kinds of accounts, particularly oral narratives that belong to subaltern communities. An example is Shahid Amin’s classic, *Event, Metaphor Memory* which re-examines Gandhian nationalism

For a useful compilation of articles on key issues in early Subaltern Studies, see chapters 1-11 of Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London and New York: Verso, 2000.

See Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter Insurgency” in *Subaltern Studies 2*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983: 1-42. Also, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, *Subaltern Studies 1*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982: 1-8; “The Small Voice of History”, *Subaltern Studies 9*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

through the lens of the infamous Chauri Chaura incident in the course of the Non Cooperation Movement in 1922. **Using official accounts, and oral testimony, the book examines the relationship between local memory and official histories.**

See for instance, Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. A more recent example is that of Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Peasant Pasts: History and Memory in Western India*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.

See Amin, "Approvers Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura", *Subaltern Studies* 5, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, 166-202.

See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980.

Amin is also one example of a Subaltern historian who has engaged critically with the colonial archive in terms of the ways in which it both enables and limits the voices of the subaltern, allowing him to speak and to not speak. **His work on colonial law, in particular "Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse" scrutinizes the colonial archive by analyzing the creation of the necessarily self-implicating testimony and evidence by the approver in the famous Chauri Chaura incident that is structured by the legal discourse of a colonial court case.** Amin's work draws on similar endeavours by historians of Europe. **In *Fiction in the Archives*, for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis looks at the "pardon tales" of petitioners in sixteenth century France; in the classic *Cheese and the Worms*, Carlo Ginzburg examines the testimony of a peasant miller, Menocchio in the course of a trial for heresy during the inquisition in sixteenth century Italy. In both cases, the focus is on the ways these testimonies are created in very particular legal contexts, and social, moral and literary universes.**

Let us turn away from social history to an important strand of historical thinking, particularly dominant in the American academy and that focuses on the formation of colonial knowledge in the context of

South Asia. Scholarship of this kind emphasizes colonialism's role in the creation – or invention of, according to some modern identities and in that regard encourages critical questioning of the categories and taxonomies of the colonial archive. **Close readings of Orientalist scholarship, missionary literature, colonial ethnographies and documents of rule reveal the recognition [and imposition of] by the colonial state of social identities particularly those of caste and religion as integral, defining features of all of native society. These scholars are concerned with colonialism as living presence as it informs and shapes the political life of the present. While there is a tendency perhaps to overemphasize the power of the colonial state to effect this degree of epistemological change, some of the best work of this kind has paid careful attention to the specific historical, intellectual contexts, both in India and in Europe, that have contributed to the creation of colonial knowledge and its categories at particular points of time.**

See Nicholas Dirks, "Colonial Histories and Native Informants: The Biography of an Archive" in Carol Breckenridge and Peter Van De Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

And finally, let us turn to the emerging body of scholarship that deals with the materiality of the [largely colonial archive] archive and focuses on themes that include studies of the native informants who helped colonial administrators and scholars whether Orientalists or ethnographers compile and validate forms of knowledge, to the armies of clerks who literally produced the archive, and facilitated rule by a regime of paper. **The intermediaries in these accounts included Sanskrit and Persian pundits who**

The classic, defining work in this field is that of Bernard Cohn. See *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. Also, Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990; Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind, Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Nicholas Dirks, for instance has argued that after the uprising of 1857, the colonial archive moved away from an investment in history (exemplified for instance by Colin Mackenzie's collection of folklore and textual materials on India) to ethnography. With its vast collection of manuals, surveys and gazetteers, the colonial archive, the supreme technology of what Dirks calls the "ethnographic state" now viewed the colonized through ascriptive categories like caste and religious identity. See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

See Michael Dodson, *Orientalism, Empire and National Culture: India 1770-1880*, Delhi: Foundation Books, 2009.

Phillip B. Wagoner, “Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 43, 2003, 783-786.

See for instance, Michael Katten, *Colonial Lists/Indian Power: Identity Politics in Nineteenth Century Telugu Speaking India*, New York: Columbia University Press 2002.

**What has been conspicuously missing from the growing literature on the colonial archive in South Asia from a range of perspectives has been a serious consideration of its status in independent India – in other words, the colonial archive in the postcolonial context. Any reflection on the relationship between state power and the archive has, by and large been restricted to the colonial.** And yet, in spite of all its continuities with its colonial past, the ways in which these institutions are imagined, organized, funded and run by the postcolonial Indian state must inevitably impact the nature of historical scholarship that emanates from them. New systems of classification and sorting [which in fact, changed considerably during succeeding and different phases of colonial rule], the categorization of material as confidential and “secret”, conservation schemes [including in recent times, the issue of what gets digitized and in what priority], decisions about language training for archivists – all of these both reflect and are constitutive of the nature and preoccupations of the state including importantly, its validation of certain versions of the past.

In this chapter, we will focus on the impact of one particularly important aspect of state building on archives in different parts of the country. Since independence collections have been, and continue to be re-distributed according to the political logic of the time determined by events like the partition and its aftermath, the

worked with the Orientalists, to native informants like Kavelli Lutchmiah who famously assisted Colin Mackenzie. They, according to scholars like Phillip Wagoner qualify the notion of an all powerful state and any uncomplicated notion of colonial knowledge that is in fact been produced to a great extent by these intermediaries. There has also been an increasing interest in the scribal communities who produced the physical artifacts that make up the colonial archive, to examinations of forms of imperial print and writing, to that of archival genres like the petition.

See Bhavani Raman, “The familial world of the Company’s kacceri in early colonial Madras” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, Vol 9, 2008.

See for instance, Miles Ogburn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company, 1550-1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

This obviously has to be in addition to the official archives of independent India [which interestingly are often housed in the same repositories that hold colonial documents] and which need to be subject to the same critical gaze.

reorganization of the country along linguistic lines in the 1950s, or the formation of new states, which is a recurring feature of political life in India. The logic of the modern archival region imposed on the colonial archive has had an impact which goes well beyond the realm of the logistical difficulties faced by scholars wishing to access it, to issues of history writing and the nature of historical consciousness about cultural and social identity.

Theories about the archive are not stable over time and region. It is important to keep in mind that they are ideologically charged spaces, which see themselves and indeed, are understood as possessing a certain kind of relationship with both national and regional history, language and culture. Importantly, the colonial document archive is also the site where political and cultural claims are increasingly being staked, a phenomenon that has grown in importance since the Right to Information Act in 2005. The nature of the archive as a legal entity in a democracy is one that requires serious consideration.

One of the mandates of this chapter is to reflect on the impact of new technology, in particular, digitization and the Internet on older document archives such as the ones we are looking at. **Digitization and making the contents of an archive available online appears to have certain obvious advantages including solving the problems of space which plague many institutions, allowing users to bypass the often excessive bureaucracy associated with official archives, more efficient finding aids and other means of document retrieval and creation of lay users in places have been in past, the exclusive preserve of scholars.** In fact however, there is no easy tale of the liberating impact of digital and Internet technology on the archive. The digital divide aside, the politics of conservation [including issues of priority and funding] and the ease with which concealment, or even alteration can take place in fact enhances state power instead of diminishing it. In addition, legal issues including those of ownership and copyright have become increasingly important in the digital [not to mention litigious] age. Thus, through the case study in this chapter, we will underline that the issue here is not merely that of the most efficient means of the

preservation of documents; it is about the constitution of historical evidence and collective memory.

## II

### RETHINKING THE REGIONAL

The regional state archive in India is a mysterious and complicated entity to say the very least. There is little uniformity in the functioning of state archives in different parts of the country as well as in their relationships with the National Archives of India and with other state archives or with provincial and district record offices. They embody different [and often shifting, depending on the political context] relationships with national history as well as with the historical imaginations of the regions that they are supposed to represent.

**In this paper, I am primarily but not exclusively concerned with the Tamil Nadu State Archives located across the road from the bustling railway station in the locality of Egmore in the city of Chennai (formerly Madras).** The TNA contains the records of the East India Company in south India and post 1857, those of the British Raj. It also contains a multitude of other valuable collections including those of the Dutch in south India, of the Nawab of Arcot and several donated private collections about which I will say more presently. **Even as I stress its importance as one of the largest and richest [in terms of its holdings] research centres in South Asia, it must be said that the Citizen's Charter of the TNA also makes it clear that the archive's main role is an administrative one – it is used by the public to access copies of government orders, information relating to landed property, etc.**

Hereafter TNA.

See <http://www.tn.gov.in/citizen/archives.html>.

Indeed, my first intention in writing this paper was to try and engage with the issue of digitization in the regional archive in connection with the land records (old survey and settlement records) that the TNA has in its possession. As the Charter points out, and as I was told repeatedly during my visit to the TNA, the archive merely holds the records in safe-keeping for the Revenue Department. If someone wants to trace the

title of his landed property, determine its boundaries, or enquire about the history of the land, it is possible to apply for certified copies of such records. These copies however, are granted and released by the Commissioner of Revenue Administration or the Director of Survey and Land Records and not the TNA itself. In fact, so strict are these boundaries that the digitization schemes launched to conserve these records are separate from those covering other collections of the TNA. Since the procedure to acquire copies of these land records appears to be fairly straightforward, it struck me as interesting that a sort of back-door business in photocopies of old land records by litigants in land disputes [usually at the village level] is a feature at the TNA. On enquiry, I was told that the photocopied records being acquired in this way had little connection with the cases being pursued or the areas under litigation. The value of these records lay in their symbolic significance and in the fact of their antiquity. The importance of the archive therefore, lies not merely in terms of its actual collections used for research or as a crucial institution in a documentary legal regime. Indeed, it is clear that these records could not be produced as evidence in any formal legal context but that they clearly carried weight in more informal arenas of mediation. Several interesting questions about the materiality and the visual significance of evidence can be raised in this context but I soon realized that attempts at ethnography on this subject — trying to talk to litigants in land disputes to enquire about their experiences with the acquisition of land records at the TNA or about the ways in which different kinds of documents functioned in these disputes, symbolically and otherwise — was an extremely difficult and long drawn one that would involve reluctant interviewees and disapproving members of staff. With some prudence, I decided therefore, to forego an examination of the subcultures that archives invariably spawn and focus directly on the institution itself. Nevertheless, the issue raises important questions regarding the status, legal and otherwise, of different kinds of holdings in the state archive. Here in the TNA, a dichotomy has been made between documents deemed important for research, and those of administrative importance that are to be handled directly by the government, rather than by the archive itself.

I turn therefore, to the career of the TNA in independent India, to consider the extent to which the modern political context has had an impact on the nature and functioning of the institution. These issues are not by any means restricted to the TNA, but its particularities are of course shaped by the political and social history of the Tamil region. What are the possibilities that the internet offers an archive of this kind? Here, I am not primarily concerned with questions of access, but with the relationship between the regional archive and regional history. A consideration of private record collections and their catalogues is one way in which to think about some of these issues.

One of the less known functions of state archives in India is the periodic acquisition of records from the general public at regular intervals. Not surprisingly, the most frenetic activity of this kind took place in the decades after independence in different parts of the country. Individuals and families, some belonging to important political and royal lineages donated their collections of records, manuscripts and other documents to the state for safe-keeping. These voluntary contributions which were sometimes solicited by the archives themselves through periodic advertisements were felt to have immense cultural and historical significance — what could be better than that the document repositories of the new nation be responsible for these? It is important to note that the politics of the acquisition of private records was complicated, and invariably changed over time. The issues involved included what the governors and administrators of different regional archives thought were appropriate and useful additions to their institutions; the ways in which a collection was recognized as having national or regional significance, and the tensions and possible contradictions in these perceptions; the relationship, legal and otherwise that those who have made these donations have with the archives as well as with the collections that they have handed over to the guardianship of the state.

**Before I turn to the TNA, let me refer to a visit to the Delhi State Archives where I had my first conversation about the nature and acquisition of private collections.** As in other places, contributions in the form of personal donations to the archive are

The Delhi State Archives, located in the Qutub Institutional Area in New Delhi falls under the Art and Culture Sector of the Delhi Government. Its lists its functions as relating to the survey, acquisition and proper preservation of cultural heritage of Delhi in the shape of documents, manuscripts, rare books, maps and others materials for administrative use and the purposes of historical research. The archive also houses and preserves records which are 25 years old (or less) of a permanent nature that belong to the departments of the Delhi Government. For more details, see: [delhiplanning.nic.in/write-up/2005-06/volume-2/ac.doc.doc](http://delhiplanning.nic.in/write-up/2005-06/volume-2/ac.doc.doc).

few and far between nowadays, although I was told that periodic advertisements soliciting contributions were still being published in the city's newspapers from time to time. Significantly, I was firmly and explicitly informed that while the Delhi Archives was a repository for manuscripts and other documents "of significance to *Delhi*", it was emphatically not interested in what was of "national significance". Materials of the latter kind, I was told, were to be given to the National Archives of India and indeed, various potential contributors had been in the past told to approach that august body instead of the Delhi State Archives. **The same principle was followed in the archive's own initiatives to survey, list and acquire collections that were "of *Delhi's* interest" from other regional archives including those of Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana as well as private records in the form of "historical manuscripts, documents, paintings, maps, farmans, sanads, parwanas and rare books, etc., dating back to the Mughal period".**

The details of this somewhat curious policy appeared fairly ambiguous and slightly unclear. As the person in charge of the acquisition of manuscripts was away, I was not able to obtain more information about how contributions are determined to be of importance to the Delhi archive or not, the details of the processes by which they were and are obtained, or see a list of what in fact had been acquired in this way over the years. Regardless, however, the question of how contributions or indeed any other kind of collection in the archive was presumed to be of national importance, or of importance to the city of Delhi alone was one which I found particularly intriguing, not least because the Delhi State Archives and the National Archives of India are located in the same city. One senior historian at the University of Delhi recently commented that the Delhi archive has been in a state of identity crisis since its inception. For instance, most materials on 1857 (which are presumably of utmost national importance) are at the National Archives of India. On the other hand, the official records for the second half of the nineteenth century are located in the state archive at Lahore in Pakistan since Delhi was administered from Punjab at this time. It is only with the twentieth century town planning and administrative records that the Delhi Archives is both rich in material, and self confident that it is the

appropriate and legitimate repository for these documents.

While the Mutiny papers are kept at the National Archives, the Delhi Archives does have sundry records from 1857, as well as the documentation related to the trial of Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. It is interesting to note the self-conscious relationship of the archive to these holdings. **Exhibitions are an important part of the Delhi Archives' stated aim of raising "the consciousness of the citizens of Delhi."** In July 2008 for instance, the ways in which archival materials on 1857 were showcased in an exhibition held at the Delhi Archives suggest that the archive's insistent emphasis on the history of Delhi was not an idle claim. While the monumental national significance of the Revolt of 1857 was acknowledged in bold letters on the pamphlet advertising the event, it also stressed that the revolt was a lens to understanding the political and cultural history of Delhi. Thus, the exhibition of "contemporary drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, private collections and other material from the Delhi Archives" was entitled "Delhi in the First War of India's Independence, 1857". It did not contradict the idea that the revolt in general was an event of national importance, but emphasized that as far as the Delhi Archives was concerned what was of significance was the uprising as it pertained to the city. The case of the Delhi Archives is by no means unique in the Indian context, but it is an example of how archives (in this case, of relatively recent standing – the Delhi Archives was set up in 1972) continue to attempt to define themselves in terms of the modern political present even while past history (or the ways in which the past is perceived) determines that these self-definitions will always be somewhat ambiguous and contradictory.

The Delhi Archives, as far as I was able to determine, appears to function quite autonomously as far as the acquisition of private records is concerned and works primarily through the sporadic initiatives of those in charge of the archive. The case of the TNA is quite different. From its inception, the TNA has acquired private collections through the Regional Committees for the Survey of Historical Records appointed by the National Archives of India and whose members include the

[delhiplanning.nic.in/write-up/2005-06/volume-2/ac.doc.doc](http://delhiplanning.nic.in/write-up/2005-06/volume-2/ac.doc.doc)

Assistant Commissioners and Collectors of District Record Offices in different parts of the country. According to the Citizen's Charter of the TNA, the Committee's aim is to "to survey and collect the rare records of historical administrative, legal and fiscal value in the hands of private persons to strengthen the history of India and to bring to light such records... to preserve them for posterity. **These records have to specifically pertain to the period before 1947; examples of contributions that would be welcome include 'palm leaves, copper plates, letters of high dignitaries, deeds, correspondence volumes, books, journals, etc., relating to the freedom movement, photos, any assignment of lands to the East India Company, or the British, religious customs, endowment of property to any charitable purpose, deed of Zamins, Polygars, Newabs, Samasthanams, Rajas, any notable events in the British Rule, etc'**".

<http://www.tn.gov.in/citizen/archives.html>.

The functioning of these Regional Committees appears to be infrequent these days, in particular in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s. The TNA however, has kept track of its acquisitions over the years, and I was able to access a partial list – unfortunately however, the names of the contributors were missing from it. The listed collections included the Pudukottai Residency records; various zamindari records including for instance, Sengampatti and Ramnad; Portuguese documents (Regimento Auditorio; Ecclesiastico de Archbispado Primacial de Goa Eda Sua Relocao Anno 1810); a collection of papers relating to the late Chief Minister and film actor MG Ramachandran (MGR); autographs and photos of nationalist leaders as well as sundry Hindi and Persian documents. The criterion for accepting contributions from the public was above all, their age. In fact, apparently many a contributor [and this was in reference to a time when the donation of private collections to the TNA was a much more frequent practice] was turned away when the collections concerned pertained to the post independence period [the MGR papers being, of course a notable exception to this rule]. Private records at the TNA [unlike both the Delhi Archives and the rest of its holdings] did not have to adhere to any strict standards of being important to some idea of the Tamil region, which accounts perhaps for the eclectic collections that have been contributed to the archive over the years.

There is another index of private collections located in different parts of the Tamil country that was generated by the TNA: this is the National Register of Private Records received from the TNA by the National Archives of India. A perusal of the National Register for the 1960s and 1970s are testament to the astonishing richness of material as well as to the zeal with which the post independence administrators of the TNA set out on the task of cataloguing private records deemed of historical value. **Indeed, the history of these state sponsored surveys that were to throw light on the culture of the region [ and the nation] and the complex ways in which they were carried out deserve to be told in their own right, as much as the tales of colonial ethnography that have so absorbed historians of colonialism.** The most impressive surveys of this kind were carried out in Rajasthan, but South India also figures prominently in these registers. As far as Tamil Nadu was concerned, the collections being referred to were in printed, manuscript and palm leaf form in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Persian, Modi, English and Arabic and included official *farmans*, reports, correspondence, judgments; memoirs of personalities including caste leaders, religious heads, missionaries and zamindars; temple and *matha* records; church and mission records; ballads, songs, stories and folklore in different forms; and local and caste histories. The National Register of Private Records is an elaborate index to these collections with extensive and detailed notes on each one. What is somewhat unclear, however, is what collections were actually acquired by the TNA, and what was merely catalogued and remained with the private institution or individual.

Clearly however, private records are seen as a category that is distinct from that of the other holdings of the TNA. For one, there is little sign of any process being put into place for the redistribution of these records along the lines of present day archival regions determined and defined by modern linguistic state boundaries within South India, something that was carried out for the TNA's normal holdings [ with the exception of the land records mentioned earlier]. Given the polylingual and varied character of the private records in the possession of the TNA, they could easily be claimed by other regional archives but no action of that sort has been taken either because there is no clear understanding of the rights of the archive over these

See Part 3, "The Ethnographic State" in Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 2003.

collections or simply that they tend to be overlooked in official drives to reorganize and reclassify the archive.

The ambiguity of the legal status of private records in the TNA is of particular significance if one considers the issue of the conservation of records, in particular in the light of the recent schemes to systematically digitize the contents of the archive. It is significant that despite the fact the TNA's private records would clearly be — in official parlance — “of significance” to different regional archives, and the question of making claims to them do not arise. Indeed, what is striking about the state of private record collections in public, state institutions is the lack of any sort of formal legal arrangements between the families that possess the collections and the institutions which wish to acquire them. This lack is striking because these collections often possess sentimental or other kinds of value for the families, which have to be acknowledged and respected even as they become part of public repository. The most that the Citizens’s Charter of the TNA does is to acknowledge, albeit briefly, the fear on the part of those donating these records that these might be snatched away from them by the state. The arrangement between the owner of the collection and the TNA is summarized thus: “Every person may either hand over the original to the archives as the records will be preserved for centuries by adopting scientific methods or they can retain the original with them and allow taking a xerox copy of such records for preservation in the archives. **If they hand over the original, they will be given access to peruse the original at any time in the archives and can take return of the original by leaving a xerox copy.**” It appears possible, therefore, that private records appear to have been overlooked in schemes to digitize the collections of the archive as a result of the ambiguity about the legal status of these records and their relationship with the TNA.

In many ways, the marginalized private record represents the all too often forgotten (both by users and official memory) possibilities that the regional archive presents to its users, possibilities that extend beyond the official record and which are indicative of the seldom tapped depth and complexity of the archive. For instance, many of these

records are those that belong to kings, zamindars and religious institutions where we see the continued articulation of notions of kingship and authority which were very different from that of the colonial state. Their existence in the archive is an important corrective to the idea of the colonial archive as a monument to the overwhelming power of the colonial state. It is also testament to the fact that while official records need to be studied sensitively in order to understand the complex character of colonial rule and power, it does not always, or just, require the reading of colonial documents “against the grain” to retrieve native voices that appear to be subsumed by a dominant state. Like folklore or oral histories, these half forgotten collections allow the historians to tell different stories about the past.

It is also interesting that the private collections at the TNA are often in the form of records that give the reader a historical sense of the everyday lives and world views of communities and individuals — something that in the Tamil context is generally seen as available only in the private and public literary output of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and is the realm of archives like the Roja Muthiah Library whose collections focus on the social and cultural history of modern Tamil Nadu. An example from the TNA is the diary of the Raja of Ramnad, a prominent Tamil zamindar from the late eighteenth century. The exact nature of the diary is unclear, given the fact that it has clearly been transcribed into English by a scribe, although it is replete with Tamil words. The account is however, a fascinating one – while it begins with somewhat formulaic ambitions for the main temple of the area, it then turns to the thoughts and ambitions of a local king in a colonial context. Thus the diary of Bhaskar Sethupathi, Raja of Ramnad recorded the following as his “ambitions in this life” in the year 1894 – “[ for the temple] to complete the golden *vimanam*, the golden cupolas, the bell tower, the *muntapam* all around the sandalwood plank in *moolasthanam*, the stone *peeda*, the silver coins for the *peeda* stone, the silver coins for the principal step, the silver coins for the *panchalochana padi*, sandalwood doors with bell metal hoops....gilt *samhasna mandapa* repair for Sree Raja Rajeswari”. The diary then rather prosaically talks of the Raja’s ambition to organize a grass plot for cows to graze. But the next few points in his list of

ambitions are of more significance, and interest. Continuing with his list, the Raja mentions his desire, **“To visit England during her majesty’s reign, to visit America, to be a fellow of Madras University, to establish a Tamil Sangam, to get into some legislative council and to obtain a HCIE (?) at least and obtain the title of Maharaja to entertain royalty at Madura.”**

It is interesting in this context to note that Bhaskar Sethupathy, the Raja of Ramnad has been a controversial figure in Tamil Nadu not least because of his involvement in the region’s caste politics. The Raja, a leader of the Maravars was vehemently opposed to what he considered were the pretensions of the low caste Nadar community during the late nineteenth century. He was a hereditary trustee of the Minakshi Sundareswara Temple in Ramanathapuram district and filed a suit against a group of Nadars who in May 1897 sought entry to the temple. From time to time, he is frequently brought up in accounts by local historians as a figure that is worth studying. A G. P. Srinivasan writing in an online article entitled **“ The Disappearance of a Vital Historical Monument”** written in May 2007 mentions with anguish that while **“dilapidated colonial buildings”** were being restored in Chennai and elsewhere, little attention was being paid to **“Sankara Vilasam”**, the guest house in the palace of the Raja of Ramnad where Vivekanand stayed before leaving for the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in October 1892 ( it was originally the Raja of Ramnad who was supposed to attend the event). Still ensconced in popular historical memory, the Raja was the product of a milieu where ideas of Tamil kingship and authority were negotiating a new colonial modernity.

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE ARCHIVAL REGION:

Some of the most frenetic activity that continues to take place in the TNA [a process that was initiated by the re-organization of south India along linguistic lines in the 1950s and continues to the present] is the attempt, following an assumed political and linguistic logic to redistribute the holdings of the archive to Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Orissa, all part of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. Sections

Diary of Bhaskar Sethupathy, Raja of Ramnad, 1894, Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai.

[http://www.ivarta.com/columns/OL\\_070307.htm](http://www.ivarta.com/columns/OL_070307.htm).

The diary of the Raja of Ramnad is not an entirely forgotten resource. The historian Pamela Price for instance has used it extensively in her work. See *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

of, as well as entire collections that “belong” to other states are periodically shipped off to the state archive in question [these being the Malabar district records, most recently]. Since the colonial government’s organization of records followed its own logic of governance, this recently initiated process has resulted in breaking the continuity of collections, not to mention the confusion of scholars. Beyond a point, however, this kind of reallocation of the resources of the TNA is not possible, particularly for the Madras Presidency records that emanate from the period before 1857, a time when the entries from different districts went into the same department volumes. The TNA is also home to records — in particular those pertaining to immigration — from erstwhile Ceylon and other South East Asian countries. In these cases, of course there is no question of Sri Lanka or any other nation staking a claim to these collections.

Since there is no consistent policy of shared catalogues, and certainly no online ones, redistribution of this kind is extremely problematic for researchers, particularly for those who may not have the time or means to make multiple trips to different institutions. Indeed, the records themselves defy the logic of modern day political boundaries and are testament to the interconnected histories of these regions. **The literary and court cultures of pre-colonial South India were polylingual to say the very least.** Colonial rule was to inherit this legacy: everyday governance in its South Indian empire was predicated on forms of rule from different parts of the country; and it was dependent on a clerical, scribal bureaucracy that wrote in a variety of languages. **In the early nineteenth century, for instance, Madras was far from being the Tamil city that it represents today – this was not merely reflected in the multi-lingual, even multi-racial character of the city,**

See for instance, Velucheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam ed, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamil Nadu*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Whether Chennai is in fact culturally and socially a predominantly Tamil city even today is an arguable matter. However, it is clear that till the late nineteenth and early twentieth with the advent of Tamil nationalism, there was no political impetus or logic for it to be labelled as such.

but in the nature of the administration and the records produced by the Madras government. Other than Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam, the colonial office and scribal bureaucracy with its links to the Maratha regime in Thanjavur, and the Mughal north used Persian and Modi extensively. Filled with petitions, memorials, correspondence and police proceedings, the records from the period are a patchwork of English interspersed with other scripts.

Just as the administrative records of the colonial government in South India reflect the need to problematize the division of material based on some assumed notion of regional pertinence, private records speak eloquently of the connections and linkages between regions. In addition, as we have seen, the catalogues of, as well as actual collections of private records are not required to possess a kind of relationship with any present day understanding of the Tamil region. Social and political documents, often in Modi and which relate to the reign of the Maratha kings of Thanjavur in the Tamil country are an important example. Take for instance the collection of P. K Pingle of Thanjavur listed in the National Register of Private Records in 1973 and which consisted of the personal papers of the famous Pingle family whose founder was one of the “Ashtapradhans” or Council of Ministers under Shivaji. **These documents mostly consisted of representations made by different poligars or local chieftans to the Maratha Rajas of Tanjavur asking for the issue of fresh *sanads* for land, and reflecting the nature of the feudal relationship between the two. The Thanjavur examples abound – another is the collection of Rao Bahadur ST Srinivasa Gopalachari, containing the original correspondence between the Government of Madras and the Raja of Thanjavur during the eighteenth century. A particularly fascinating instance in this connection is a reference to private collections that contain the correspondence between the widows of Shivaji and the British government.**

See Raman, “Colonial Kacceri”; Aparna Balachandran, “Of Corporations and Caste Heads: Urban Rule in Company Madras”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, Vol 9, 2008; Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006.

National Register of Private Records: Descriptive Lists of Documents Available in Bihar, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. National Archives of India, 1973, based on information received in 1960-61. Delhi: National Archives of India, 1973, 92-106.

National Register of Private Records: Descriptive Lists of documents available in Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and National Archives, New

National Register of Private Records: Descriptive Lists of Documents Available in Bihar, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and National Archives of India, New Delhi based on information received in 1962-1963, Delhi: National Archives of India, 1973, 58.

Religious records belonging to *maths*, temples and churches are also testament to these connections. An interesting example is that of Suchindram located presently in the district of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu but intimately connected to the Travancore Kingdom which in its heyday in the eighteenth century included much of Kerala and what is now known as southern Tamil Nadu. The frequent correspondence carried out between the distant Travancore Palace and the temple authorities is illustrative of the patronage bestowed on the temple by the state. Other than land records and accounts of jewellery and other property possessed by the temple, the collection contains crucial documents in Tamil and Malayalam relating to the practice of *kaimukku* or *pratayam*, a penance performed to prove the innocence of someone accused of some guilt. According to this practice, the accused was to dip his hand into boiling ghee, and if his hand came out unhurt, his innocence was proven. Interestingly, enough this ordeal was restricted to Nambudiri Brahmins of Kerala and the fact that they were particularly partial to the Suchindram temple in spite of living far away from it, gave the *kaimukku* an added significance.

Turning the pages of the private register starkly demonstrates the political, trade, religious and other kinds of linguistic and cultural links between areas that would today constitute deliberately distinct archival regions. To pick examples is a difficult task – one interesting instance is the collection belonging to R Kunjukrishna Pillai from Kanyakumari which is listed under the entries for Tamil Nadu for the years 1962-63. **These family records in Malayalam on palm leaf include deeds relating to the mortgage and transfer of agricultural slaves.** Given that the rich pre 1857, official records on agrestic servitude in Kerala continue to be located in the archive at Chennai, it is clear that any student studying land relations and slavery in Kerala

Delhi, based on information received in 1959 -60, Delhi: National Archives of India, 1972, 111-123.

National Register of Private Records: Descriptive Lists of Documents Available in Bihar, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and National Archives of India, New Delhi based on information received in 1963-1964, Delhi: National Archives of India, 1973, 196.

needs to be closely acquainted with the official and non-official records at the TNA.

### III

#### THE INTERNET AND THE ARCHIVE

This final section will consider the relationship between the Internet and the regional state archive. For the present, the scenario is almost entirely a hypothetical one because although many regional archives have ongoing digitization schemes, there is little talk of access to their resources on the World Wide Web. Of the many possible questions to ask in the light of these discussions, one important one is — what could be enabled through the online sharing of the catalogues of various regional archives, for instance those of the southern states in India?

In the previous section we discussed the on-going division of collections at the TNA according to the logic of present day political configurations on the one hand; and on the other, about private collections which remain unacknowledged but are startling in the ways in which they reveal the entangled nature of the social and cultural histories of regions that we today consider disparate. It is clear that resource sharing between institutions is essential. In an ideal situation, sharing of this kind would include that of collections themselves and in the scenario that is now under consideration, that of the catalogues to the collections in these institutions. These would not only include lists of the different kinds of material, but also the detailed indices to the proceedings of different departments of government produced at different points of time by colonial clerks, or even imaginative new ones that could perhaps reflect the ways the myriad ways in which the material has travelled. Catalogues such as these would of course be extremely useful to users who might be unable to travel extensively to access collections at different repositories and for whom the convenience of an online catalogue where the existence of a record can be ascertained and confirmed before embarking on what could be a long and expensive journey would be immense. The presence of a shared online shared catalogue which includes not just the archives' "official" holdings but other collections like private

records might make the user aware of historical links and connections – social, cultural and political – that access to the archive from the increasingly narrow vantage point of the physical space of regional archive might not provide. This is particularly important for the largest users of the archives – students from Tamil Nadu — the vast majority of whom for economic and logistical reasons, the TNA will be the only historical archive that they will consult. While one cannot foresee the kind of scholarship that this might generate, it is significant that access to the polylingual nature of the Tamil past need not be understood as the preserve of medievalists, with knowledge of literature, and esoteric language skills; these are equally striking in the records of colonial governance, both in their content and form.

We could argue that online digital catalogues also opens up the important possibility of writing about the archive in new ways, focusing not merely on its content, but on institutional history in different political contexts. If the forms, genres and repetitions of the colonial archive reveal much about the nature of the colonial state, then the Internet in making public, and participating in the recategorization and reclassification of the archive makes the preoccupations and emphasis of the postcolonial state particularly clear. It opens up the possibility of the archive being seen not as a mere repository but as an actor in production of historical scholarship by determining amongst other things, the movement and availability of sources according to logic which is certainly not that of scholarship.

As a institution, the TNA has little place in public consciousness, in fact its presence is best noted by its absence and from time to time, notices in the newspaper about conservation projects or digitization schemes. Even as members of the city's English speaking middle class participate in walks and talks celebrating the colonial architecture of the city, the TNA, the chief repository of the documentary remains of the colonial state seems at a curious remove from it all. Given the bureaucratic hurdles the non scholar has to cross in order to access the state archive, an online catalogue is one way to create new kinds of users for the archive, and indeed to generate interest around it as a documentary evidence of the historical

links between regions, cultures and languages which do not fit neatly into official categories dictated to us. this has a particular resonance in a place like chennai, where twentieth century tamil nationalism has resulted in the popular conception of the city as an overwhelmingly tamil linguistic and cultural zone, eliding both its historical heritage but also resulting in the present day subsumption of other linguistic and cultural identities in the city.

## CHAPTER THREE: IN THE CAPITAL

76

81

As we stood a whole 45 minutes in line at the gates of the National Archives in Delhi until we filled in a form that clarified our identity, we noticed that the novelist Amitav Ghosh swanned in without too much of a wait. Understandably, the next painstakingly researched novel should not be kept wilting in the sun. The fact is however, that many potential researchers who approach state archives do so with a little apprehension about possible obstacles in the way of actually getting in. The focus of our interest in this visit to the National Archives was to find out what rules formally governed the average citizen's interaction with archives, and how open they were to involvement from historians and other researchers. The anxiety that one perceives initially on speaking to staff about general access and (as a separate issue) about the fragility of documents contrasts with the view of many of the archivists, who assert that the archives are technically open to all citizens, and are a public repository. This legal fact is expectedly mediated by other legal qualifications about political sensitivity and interests of the nation, and subject to a relay of permissions solicited from various authorities. A search for a conspiracy of concealment however, would draw a blank in most state archives. What works is a sort of relay of apprehensiveness and bureaucratic lag, with many staff anxious about handing over what we would see as an innocuous list of publications available in their bookshop, to a list of documents acquired from the British Library through entirely official exchange agreements. Save those who are higher up in the hierarchy and more secure in their positions, acquiring information could necessitate an RTI application just to surmount the anxiety generated by our informal questioning.

**This anxiety is better understood when we learn that the National Archives of India (NAI), one of the largest repositories of colonial and post-independence records, is overseen by the Ministry of Culture, but also, by default, by the Home Ministry. As the official repository of 'non-current records', the NAI is the recipient of de-classified documents and receives directives from time to time from the Home Ministry regarding restrictions to be placed on public viewing of documents. This fact generates**

<http://nationalarchives.gov.in/>.

an over-hanging awareness of potential reprimands and memos that could issue from these Ministries, asking for explanations for why certain documents were released. A direct result of this is the pro-active censorship of materials such as maps of disputed territories or documents that 'may incite communal disharmony' by the archival staff themselves. One member of the staff, for instance, disallowed the reproduction of a map of the Tibetan region on the grounds that it would 'jeopardize the geo-political interests of the country', and recounts how he was responsible for withholding certain documents that were demanded by motivated political parties during the Emergency as their release would have impacted the office of the leader of the opposition at the time, Charan Singh.

The NAI thus sees itself as closely wedded to the state and as a responsible guardian of potentially powerful documents that would have dire consequences in the wrong hands. No other state archive quite sees itself as the official concealer of the state's dirty linen, and the National Archives, in that sense, is the apex institution in the degree to which it alone manifests emotions displayed to a lesser degree by state archives across the country: secrecy, responsibility, control, paternalism, and righteousness as the arbiter of access.

Archivists themselves are aware of this. They point to the fact that the maximum difficulty is encountered at the gate; where it can take a full half-hour or more to get past the security, get a daily pass issued, etc. Senior members of at least two prestigious archives in the capital pointed to the security guard's authority at the gate as being the biggest hurdle to accessing the archives. Some point to the 'caution exercised by the hatchet' at the Ministry level, even before documents arrive in the public domain.

Pramod Mehra, the Assistant Director of the Archives who has also researched the archives as an area of interest, indicates that little has changed since 1923 in the form of record-keeping, a consciousness he says, brought in by the colonial government. The strife over public access can be recounted from the time of the colonial

government with differing views exercised by changing governor-generals. The archives, he states, function as a mediator between the creating agency such as the Ministries, and scholars. But, he insists, all who carry bona fide documents proving their identity as citizens have an inalienable right to enter the archives.

Technically therefore, there seem to be sufficient spaces for intervention by users, and in fact, the increase in the number and kind of users has in itself forced an expansion in the categories of users permitted. It would appear that this is the trend in other state institutions too. Our earnest 'conscious-citizen' stance seems a bit misdirected. Where archival records accidentally have non-historical functions, as in the state-specific Delhi Archives, to be discussed later, the archive alters eventually to accommodate users and it would seem that generating such users and uses is the easier way to address the question of access.

The other mechanism is to find hooks within the system through which to enable access. Take the case of the Central Secretariat Library, which is housed within the Secretariat complex in New Delhi. The Library sees itself as a repository, but not as a historical, moral or political guardian of government records and documents, open to government employees by right, for any research they may want to conduct; in contrast to the *archive*, and regardless of content, this is only a *library*. As it transited from the colonial period, this library stored official documents that pertain to the past of the current state. Since the library views itself as open to the public for general reading, there is not much anxiety over making older books and documents available. A student working on the North East, for instance, will find it cumbersome to enter the National Archives and to access maps of the region which may be far more easily traced in the Central Secretariat Library.

What is of even greater interest is that this is the library that holds any document acquired through government exchange programmes, for example, by a foreign entity from any archive or library in India, in formal collaboration with a state institution. So, for instance, the online Digital South Asia Library (a consortium that

is fronted on the University of Chicago website) collected a range of literary works in Indian languages based on the compilations of a national librarian. A copy of this collection lies with the Central Secretariat, as do microfilms that have been received as part of an exchange programme with the British Library. The current director of this Library appears only too willing to encourage collaborations from historians towards the cataloguing of these collections, which once again are closed to the public merely because adequate cataloguing procedures are not in place. In an interview that appeared to open doors, he insisted that generating public pressure around the significance of the collection would work as a persuasive force, as evidence that the funds allocated for digitization or preservation are in fact needed, and that an audience exists for such material.

It seems as though appealing to abstract principles of access, citizenship and rights calls forth nameless and immovable blocking mechanisms inbuilt in the state, whereas tinkering with minor functions that do not invoke its broader *raison d'être* allows one to enter unnoticed.

In an unpublished dissertation, Bhavani Raman traces how the colonial state in Tamil Nadu endowed paper transactions with multiple values of authority, evidence, law and veracity. In the process, oral transactions were negated as a trustworthy form for legal and political transactions. **Documents, she claims, 'not only became pre-eminent artifacts of knowledge, but acquired a punitive power. This situation is akin, she says to what David Dery calls 'papereality', where documents become 'real' in as far as they have to be taken into account by everyone, and are the binding intermediaries to the relationship between state and citizen.** This 'document raj' as she characterizes the rule of the colonial document, became the over determined sign of the reach of the colonial state.

The National Archive as a sign of the postcolonial state's existence carries all of these burdens. The fact that the state continues to deposit traces of its deliberations with the archive makes the archive a potentially explosive repository of recent political

Bhavani Raman, 'Introduction - The Document Raj: Writing, Scribes, And Company Rule in Madras', in "Document Raj: Scribes and Writing in Company Rule Madras, 1780-1860" Dissertation submitted to the University of Michigan, 2007.

David Dery "Papereality" and learning in bureaucratic organizations, *Administration & Society*; Jan 1998; 29, 6; ABI/INFORM Global p. 677.

history. The same archive is also a sign of colonial rule and its departure; a sign of the partition of what would have been a larger state into two; a repository too of documents that carry antiquarian value and are therefore the sign of the state's lineage. For this reason, the same map lying in the National Archive is overlaid with meanings, and divested of them when in a public library. Any call on the national archive to reveal its documents in the name of democracy only presses on these highly charged points and releases the genie that overlooks national security and heritage.

In seemingly sharp contrast to this apparently fraught relationship to documents that are deemed particularly sensitive, is the universal state mandate for transparency through the use of digitization of government documents. The state would appear to be the most fervent believer in the promise of digital technology, as though the sheer appearance of data on a screen would rescue it from its own inability to wrest information from its entrails and free it into uncontrolled public space. This belief mirrors the tendency to see the introduction of all new technology as the furthest point in a history of progress. It scarcely needs to be elaborated that controls can be extended to the digital domain. The attempt here however, is to emphasize the relationship to technology that is not channelled through the state's express intent, but as a default function of state, to generate some mechanisms intended to enhance democratic participation while generating, in the same mode, mechanisms to protect itself against citizen scrutiny or participation.

The visual nature of the Internet as opposed to the paper document however, contributes to the feeling of its intrinsic publicness. All restrictions remaining the same, the sheer availability of the document online promises to eliminate the series of interactions and obstacles involved in entering the archive, extracting, circulating, collecting and replacing documents on their shelf. The ongoing digitization of the catalogue of the National Archive itself, which already has numerous errors, is a sign however, that this task is a gargantuan long-winded one, involving considerable language skills. Past efforts to include lay historians in decision-making have

resulted in the physical exercise of inclusion, without any alteration in the actual decision-making or agenda of the archive.

Does one then see Internet technology as a continuation of state mechanisms of shaping and contouring citizenship? Such a view would disallow for the potential of this technology in itself to generate its own uses, and for the unpredictability of users. It may be more useful to sidestep perspectives that position technology as a neutral mediator between state and citizen, or as a vehicle of advancement external to the user, and look instead to the zones where the intent of state or the plea of the citizen is absent.

Such zones present themselves at the points where the state is at its most 'bureaucratic' and therefore most devoid or threatened by intent. Such points are the Delhi State Archives, which sees itself as fulfilling a mundane bureaucratic task, or the Delhi Secretariat, or those collections within the National Archive that can be construed as being mundane, which do not greatly distinguish between a government report generated in 2009 and one issued in 1860, seeing both as documents of the government. It is at these points, where the passage of documents is viewed as between holder and any eventual user, not a rights bearing citizen, that the fluidity of technology is most likely to be visible. Both government agency and their visitors are here cast as already inserted into a legal or other system that has accounted for the transaction, and neither side views itself as an agent of democracy.

For those conscious of the pedagogic and political potential of state holdings this may seem to ignore the most vital of the historical/cultural/political collections. Yet, this aims to suggest that outside of technocratic visions (that will take decades to achieve), where both the state and large funding agencies in the form of universities or corporate houses transform the archive, the more practical way of gaining entry is to find points of entry which maximize one's invisibility and minimize agency as researcher, activist and writer.





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