

Stephan Andrews/White Star



Maps discovered in the bell tower of the Karachi Municipal Corporation building, awaiting conservation

The challenges in documenting and accessing historical records in Pakistan

By Sanam Maher

Paper work

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Courtesy Aqeel Abbas Jafri

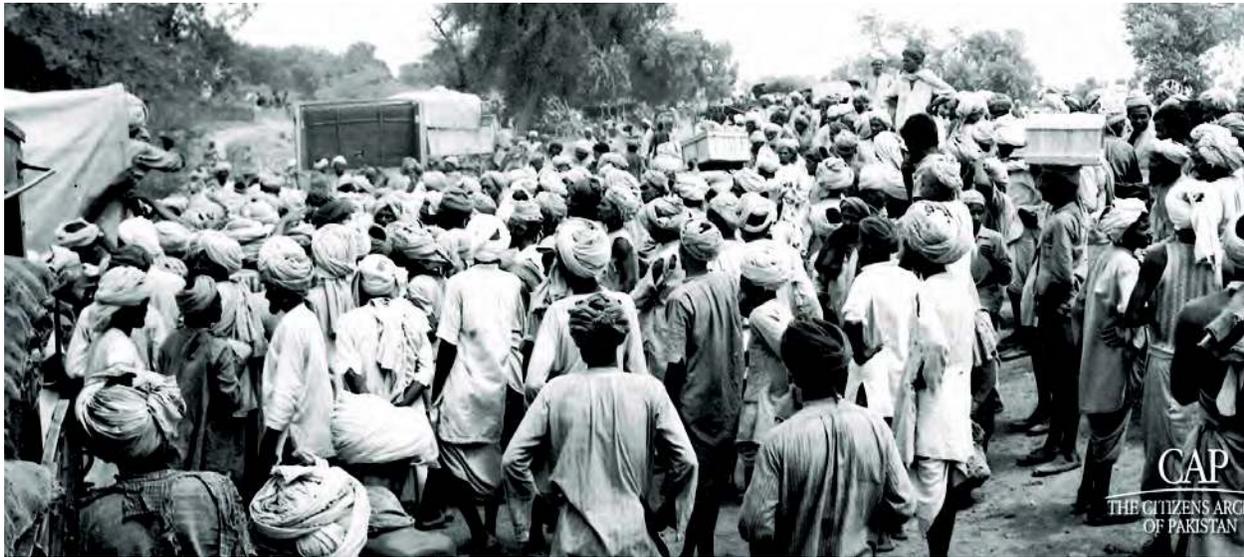


An advertisement for the opening of Hotel Metropole in Karachi in March, 1950

“How much has India paid you to get this information?” asked a librarian at a government archive when a private archivist Ahmed Saleem attempted to access documents for his research into Sikh history. Saleem laughs as he recalls his (mis)adventures in Pakistan’s provincial and national archives. “Staff members at the archives would have a number of excuses for my request to access files,” he says. During the course of his research into Partition, Saleem was often told that the material he was seeking was classified as it posed a potential threat to ‘Pakistan’s integrity’. He believes “the chief secretary of the Punjab Archives keeps all records of Bhagat Singh’s trial in a drawer in his desk and if you ask for these files, he questions whether you are working for India.”

Saleem’s assertions echo what researchers in Pakistan have been saying for years: government archives are rich repositories of information for those researchers who manage to whisper the right words to open these veritable Solomon’s mines of historical records. With provincial archives slowly transferring data from outdated microfilms into computerised systems, these records are largely well preserved, though poorly organised. As one former archive director says, “There is no shortage of funds — that is a myth.” The problem, he believes, lies within the administration, failing to employ professional, well-trained archivists who are able to handle the material in their charge.

Many researchers claim that their work would not be possible without the aid of personal connections.



A photograph from F.E. Chaudhry's collection depicting refugees enroute to Pakistan in 1947

"[Officials at] the National Archives do not like new people," says Tahir Mehdi, who was commissioned to create a book on elections in Pakistan from 1970 to 2008. He had to use personal contacts to manoeuvre his way into the archives' collection to collate his study. Noman Baig's experience was no different: a research student at the University of Texas, he discovered that a staff member at the Liaquat National Library came from his neighbourhood in Karachi. After he was turned away from the library with the instruction to present a letter explaining why he required access, Baig utilised this personal connection. He was also told that he had to approach a minister in order to gain access to legislative debates from the 1980s stored in the Sindh Assembly library. "I believe the archive is a preservation of collective memory, accessible only to people with social and cultural capital," reflects Baig.

Certain officials grant access once a checklist of bureaucratic procedures has been followed. Nasreen Anjum Bhatti, a consultant at the Classical Music and Research Cell at the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, explains that researchers can access more than 700 hours of recorded music once they write a letter about their project to the director-general in Islamabad requesting access. However, not all archive administrators may be as seemingly forthcoming. Those at the Punjab Archives, for instance, refused to acknowledge that Saleem's research was purely personal. They asked him to bring a letter from any educational institution confirming that he was conducting research on their behalf. He also found that his motivations to conduct research confused officials. "I was often questioned about why I had decided to undertake the research," he recalls.

Government efforts to whitewash historical records pose another problem. "There is no published record of the 1977 general election available except in one gazette notification offering names of returned

candidates," writes Mehdi in his record of 38 years of Pakistani elections. Four months after that election, General Ziaul Haq took control of the government and Mehdi was told that "the record was destroyed by the authorities under express instructions of the military ruler." He then painstakingly compiled the results and other data from newspaper reports — which were also incomplete, as election coverage suffered due to the announcement of the opposition boycott a day after polling for the National Assembly.

Mehdi was also frustrated by the careless cataloguing in public libraries — particularly the Punjab Public Library — and the level of vandalising in its newspaper records. "The Punjab Public Library does not have newspapers published in March and April 1977," he says. "Library officials say this is because General Zia erased records from that time but it could be because of carelessness on their part," Mehdi adds. He also found that microfilm monitors at the National Archives were often a problem to use: any material that needed to be captured from the microfilm required different equipment which often did not work. Similarly, officials at government libraries and archives would often tell Saleem that their photocopiers were not working. Faced with such circumstances, researchers and visitors to these archives and libraries resort to the only available method of copying the material — they rip pages out of newspapers and books or simply pocket the material, points out Aqeel Abbas Jafri, the writer of the exhaustive *Pakistan Chronicle*, which details 752 months of Pakistan's history.

Often the problem of access is a literal one. Researchers complain that the location of several archives, particularly the National Archives, within high-security zones instead of universities or colleges, becomes a deterrent because of the hassle involved in going through elaborate security checks.

Many government departments fail to send their

In 2000, Lahore's National College of Arts (NCA) celebrated its 125th anniversary and the then principal Sajida Vandal was interested in commemorating the college's history after 1947 and before 1958 when its name changed from the Mayo School of Art. No one at the college was sure where school records from the time existed, if at all. "An old employee of the college told me there was a room where some sacks of records had been placed," recalls Nadeem Omar Tarar, the head of the NCA's communication and cultural studies department. He discovered a small, dank room opposite the architecture department building, shuttered since the 1960s and containing sacks of paper records, some of which were crumbling to dust. Aided initially by a team of three assistants, he embarked upon a 'labour of love', cataloguing and documenting all college records and administrative files. "It has taken us five years to bring the archive to a state where it is fit for public access," says Tarar.

With the assistance of the Punjab Archives and the Lahore Museum, Tarar and his team set up a small conservation unit and a fumigation centre to preserve the paper records. Since they began work on this project, they have digitised more than 80 per cent of the records. They have also interviewed teachers and alumni to create an oral history archive of the institution, with stories dating back to the 1960s. The archive's collection of more than 3,500 records includes lithographs, folios, maps and books, a catalogue

non-current records to archives, as they should. Iqbal Nafees Khan, a former director of the Sindh Archives, says he drafted the Sindh Archives Act during his tenure but before it could go through the procedures required to pass legislation, in what he calls "*siyaasi chakkar*" or "political manoeuvring", Khan was removed from his post as director in June 2011. He says he has "little hope that the current people will pursue the act." (See The Missing Link by Moosa Kaleem)

Labour of love



Courtesy Nadeem Omar Tarar



Administrative records in the National College of Arts Archive, following conservation and cataloguing, in 2002

of which can be accessed through the NCA website. As the process of conservation continues, Tarar's focus has shifted from the NCA to include what he calls "the cultural world of Lahore". His archive has expanded to include negatives and prints of photographers (largely from Lahore) — including the collection of centurion photographer F E Chaudhry who took his first photograph in 1930 — dating back to the early 20th century. "At the [NCA's] documentation centre, we have a range of collections from photojournalists of early 20th century," says Tarar. "These photographers had a very wide canvas so you have images of everything from the wedding of Nawab of Kalabagh's son to political meetings, Lahori melas and the city as it went through different seasons." Such an anthropologically-rich archive is necessary for developing "historical perspective" he insists, saying that the process of archiving must include conservation, preservation and access. Accordingly, the material from the NCA archives is routinely exhibited and Tarar is currently planning an illustrated history of the NCA through the photographs at his disposal.

Tarar is also determined to ensure access to any NCA administrative file as he believes this encourages a culture of accountability. "Institutions have a tendency not to

A birthday celebration unearths the National College of Arts' history

attend to record-keeping and record-management even though government offices are supposed to send all non-current records to official archives. But most do not do so out of sheer laziness." As a result, it will be impossible 20 years from today to search for such records. Total histories will be wiped out because of mismanagement". ■

— Sanam Maher

While researchers are quick to point out the shortcomings of archives and libraries, administrators are equally vocal about the problems they face. There is an undercurrent of resentment among administrators, who believe a majority of researchers approaching them are often lazy. "When we put the files in front of the researchers, they run away," says Khan. Once, a professor from the University of Balochistan asked him to research and compile original documents supporting her thesis and eventually sent her son to sort through

Personal histories

Recording and preserving Pakistan's Partition's voices

“The two of them used to call each other by their pet names,” recalls Zeenat Safdar Haroon, in an interview about Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his sister Fatima Jinnah. “She used to call him ‘Jin’ and he would call her ‘Fatty,’” Haroon says. This interview is part of the Citizens Archive Pakistan’s (CAP) Oral History Project which records the stories of Pakistan’s Partition Generation — a generation that will soon leave us.

Established in 2007, the Oral History Project expanded to include stories of minority groups and reminiscences of a nation at work and at play as it struggled to find its identity. Utilising its vast photography archive (photographs or documents donated to the organisation or found with interviewees are digitised), CAP produces videos of these oral histories, accessible through the organisation’s website and shared on Facebook and YouTube, which provide viewers with an arresting alternate vision of Pakistani history from the familiar rote-learned version taught in classrooms.

CAP interns spend hours at the Liaquat National library, digitising newspaper



Courtesy CAP

A newspaper from 1947 recreated for CAP's 2010 Birth of Pakistan exhibition

records before they are dumped or crumble beyond use. This material is exhibited through photography exhibitions, exhibitions catering to children, the Shanaakht festival and CAP's school outreach tours (conducted in government and low-income schools in Karachi). CAP is pushing for a Living History Museum which the organisation hopes will be a “space where people can hear the oral history of first generation Pakistanis... where people can see Pakistan through the ages,” according to one of its founders, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy. However, even as it has carved out a niche in Karachi for exhibitions exploring Pakistan’s history, Chinoy admits that finding funding for such events is difficult and the organisation has been unable to find a sponsor for the Shanaakht Festival in 2011, pushing the festival to 2012. CAP has often had to go through bureaucratic channels in order to access government-maintained archives — in Lahore, volunteers found it difficult to access the Land Revenue Records, most of which they found incomplete and in deplorable condition. ■

— Sanam Maher

the useful documents. Khan complains that his staff was often asked to conduct research rather than assist. No wonder, he says, that the archive’s reading room is usually empty.

With a library that possesses little to no organisation, it is understandable that researchers might leave the work of seeking material to those working within the archives who presumably know the contents of these disheveled spaces the best. Nadeem Omar Tarar, head of the communication and cultural studies department at Lahore’s National College of Arts, points out that research is often a tiresome process in Pakistan and, therefore, archive users must be persistent. “I have seen international students waiting for days at the Punjab Archives for material to be delivered,” he says. (See Labour of Love)

While some researchers persist in plumbing the

depths of government-maintained archives, others have chosen to create alternate archives or records. In 1990, Saleem created a private archive (a trust named the South Asian Research and Resource Centre). It provides access at a cost of 25,000 rupees for Pakistani students and 700 dollars for international students for a five-year term of doctoral research. Containing copies of newspapers (such as the Pakistan Times from 1947 and Dawn from 1953), magazines and the proceedings of the national and provincial assemblies, his archive includes photocopies of a range of material from international archives where he has found it easier to access material deemed classified in Pakistan. Saleem finds Anarkali’s footpaths and rubbish sellers around Lahore a rich source of material for his archive. When someone dies, often their books and papers are thrown out without the

knowledge that they may contain rare books older than a 100 years, he explains. Even as the archive is currently in its seventh home and has been shifted from Lahore to Islamabad, Saleem insists it must remain in Pakistan even though he says he has received offers to shift it abroad.

Another example of an archival treasure trove in the making is in the work of the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), established in 2007. With an archive including more than 650 hours of audio recordings, the organisation hopes to provide material at a fee to universities and colleges around the world, while local students have already utilised its collection for research. CAP has also managed to coax a great deal of material from private collectors (such as Mohammad Luthfullah Khan who possesses, amongst other materials, an unrivaled collection of audio recordings in Pakistan) who have previously shunned public exhibitions, fearing that their treasures may be stolen or damaged.

CAP seeks the stories of ordinary Pakistanis, documenting their experiences of events that shaped national history (See Personal Histories). However, limitations on funding and a relatively smaller outreach means that the stories of those not living in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore or Islamabad often fall through the cracks.

Natasha Raheja, founder and director of the US-based Sindhi Voices Project, has conducted workshops in India and Pakistan, teaching volunteers to record stories of what she calls “the Sindhi experience” of Partition. Teaching her project-volunteers to look beyond the “big names or prominent figures”, she hopes to include the stories of women or marginalised groups and create an alternate record of the experience of Partition. Raheja’s complaint about Indian archives is curiously familiar: “Access is often limited to master narratives or official records and many archives have complicated rules whose level of enforcement is contingent upon the staff’s mood,” she says.

Similarly, journalist and filmmaker Beena Sarwar has attempted to document her late father’s role in the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) from 1949-1954. “As a child, I was aware of the impact of the movement,” says Sarwar, “but after my father passed away, I felt there was a need to preserve the history of that period.” Sarwar was aided by six issues of the DSF’s publication, the

Stories of Sindh

The Institute of Sindhology’s efforts to preserve Sindhi heritage

Mahtab Akbar Rashidi, a former culture secretary with the Sindh government (from 1989-1991 and from 2005-2007), feels archives cannot be properly maintained if the lines of responsibility for archiving institutions remain mercurial. The archives department in Sindh, for example, was initially under the ministry of culture and later the ministry of information. Such changes, according to her, have a direct impact on how the department performs its core function of preserving and maintaining old official records.

As the director of the University of Sindh’s Institute of Sindhology from 1983 to 1988, Rashidi created a veritable treasure trove of Sindh’s history and politics. The institute is home to oral histories (including an interview with Sindhi nationalist leader G M Syed when he was under house arrest), manuscripts, newspapers (Rashidi is particularly proud of the acquisition of the first newspaper in the Sindhi language, *Al Waheed*, from Mirpur Bathoro in Thatta district), music, video (intellectual and writer Pir Ali Mohammad Shah Rashidi consented to an interview on the condition that it would not be released during his lifetime) and books.

Rashidi recalls how the secretaries of various government departments did not attend budget meetings, instead sending an additional-secretary and stalling any decisions regarding the institute’s budgetary requirements.

She is not sure if the institute is in the same condition it used to be as “the people in charge often have no idea about what they are in charge of.” She adds: “We cannot treat the archives as just another department where people come to work everyday and take their salaries. People at the helm of affairs need to feel the importance of these archives and respect the past.” ■

— Sanam Maher

Courtesy Aqeel Abbas Jalri



Pakistani soldiers emptying their weapons of ammunition at the close of the 1971 war



Tanveer Shattazad

Work underway at the National Archive's Conservation Laboratory in Islamabad



Stephan Andrews/White Star

Archival boxes containing rescued records dating back to the 1800s, in the Karachi Municipal Corporation Library

Student Herald although her father's papers had been 'borrowed' by a group of students and never returned and she found that newspaper records of the time did not portray a full, or even accurate, account of the DSF's activities. She began work in 2009 on a 30-minute documentary titled *Aur Niklein Ge Ushshaq Ke Qafley* (There will be more caravans of passion). Digitised copies of the Student Herald can be found on a blog maintained by Sarwar while the documentary can be viewed on YouTube. "This was a subject of personal interest to me and I felt a sense of responsibility documenting this story," she explains, "but it is necessary for people doing this sort of documentation to move out of urban areas. For now, certain ethnic or political backgrounds dictate their work. We have a very rich oral tradition that needs to be documented."

Karachi-based Jafri spent 10 years creating the *Pakistan Chronicle*, a record of major events in Pakistan since 1947, meticulously pieced together newspaper records and photographs, often relying on archives maintained by friends or contacts. A cursory glance through the book reveals stunning images: Pakistani soldiers in 1971 stand in a line emptying their weapons of ammunition (found from an issue of the *India Today* magazine); Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's National Identity Card is heralded as "the first National Identity Card"; another image shows Altaf Hussain at the first public meeting of the then Mohajir Qaumi Movement in Karachi. Jafri says the joy of research lies in the trail from one image or document to another — a joy that Pakistani researchers often miss out on, as the trail

goes cold or leads to a dead end. In 2009, Yasmeen Lari, founder of the Heritage Foundation, launched the Karachi e-Library, providing researchers with this very thrill of discovering primary sources to aid their theses. When sacks of documents were discovered in the bell tower in Karachi's Municipal Corporation (KMC) building, Lari and her team sifted through records from the 1800s to the 1950s. Within the KMC library, shelves of brown acid-free archival boxes are dotted with red, yellow, green or blue stickers, denoting the stage of cataloguing (see *Rediscovering Karachi*). In the final stage, a document has been digitized, any missing information restored via Photoshop and transferred to the e-library database where it will be entered into one of several categories — Images, Books, Sources, Karachipedia (a Wikipedia-like source of information on Karachi) and so on.

Even as some researchers debate the frenetic push to digitise original materials, arguing that the "contact high" obtained from interacting with source materials or the nuances of a document are lost in digitisation, others push for the preservation of materials that would, otherwise, be crumbling in warehouses or disregarded in homes. While Lari's e-library will be online later this year, a quick glance at Indian counterparts such as the South Asian American Digital Archive, where users can scroll through digitized documents pertaining to the Indian diaspora in America or the Public Access Digital Media Archive, which allows users to upload and provide text-commentary to videos, reveals the scope of alternative digital collections (compared to larger archives such as

Stephan Andrews/White Star



Detailed image of a blueprint for a mosque in Kharadar by Jewish architect Moses Somake

Surrounded by the names of thousands of architects and planners whose buildings are the palimpsest upon which Karachi is built, architect and conservationist Yasmeen Lari pulls out her favourite document – the plan for a mosque in Kharadar, created by Jewish architect Moses Somake. She intends to seek out the mosque and is thrilled by the discovery of the Mohatta Palace’s architect Agha Ahmed Husain’s letterhead and signature among the Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) papers – no such record has been seen before.

Lari’s Heritage Foundation is working with the KMC papers dating from the 1800s to the 1950s and has, for now, handed over all post-1950s material stored in archival boxes to the KMC. She intends to come back to this rather newer material after she has restored, preserved, scanned and digitised all the pre-1950s material which is more vulnerable to decay.

Lari’s passion for the exhaustive digitisation and cataloguing of the KMC records is born out of the seven years she spent researching for her book *The*

those maintained by the British Library, the University of Cambridge’s Center of South Asian Studies’ Oral History Collection or Columbia University’s Oral History Collection).

Lari is currently working on a law that would apply to both tangible historical records (documents and buildings, for example) and what she calls “intangible history” — this includes the histories of people, traditions, languages, and cultures. This law would protect and call for the documentation of these histories. The Heritage Foundation has organized

Rediscovering Karachi

Municipal records dating back to the 1800s reveal **a wealth of original maps and blueprints of Karachi**



The process of removing termites from books at Liaquat National Library

Dual City: Karachi during the Raj. The documents she has retrieved from the KMC are repaired and, once scanned, are filed away in archive boxes. She believes that access to soft copies of the documents is enough as the originals are too fragile to handle. While some original maps and blueprints are now displayed within the KMC building, others have been carefully stacked inside the institution’s library. Plans to launch a programme whereby local donors can fund the digitisation and preservation of documents are underway — the project is currently maintained through German and Dutch funding. Lari estimates the cost at 1,000 rupees per page and believes local sponsorship will endear the documents and their history to the people of the city. A similar venture for producing cards and mugs bearing images from the records, such as an 1874 plan for Karachi’s Governor House, hopes to spread awareness about the project.

Lari recalls her visit to Muhafiz Khanas [built by the British in the subcontinent] in Peshawar and Abbotabad, housing post-Partition records pertaining to land, revenue and court verdicts where well-kept records were vulnerable to weather conditions in decrepit buildings. In Abottabad, she begged officials to place tarpaulin on the records in order to protect them from the damp. “I also found maps dating back to 1876 locked in commissioners’ cupboards all over the country,” she says. But “nobody was willing to share their maps with me.” Later, she learned that these records were burned. ■ — Sanam Maher

workshops with schoolchildren educating them about the process of archiving. Lari made sure each child was given an acid-free archival box, encouraging them to begin maintaining their own collections and fostering an awareness of the importance of such archives. Perhaps the passage of a law protecting our histories, coupled with an education about the importance of alternative narratives and preservation of records, is the best way to ensure that future generations of Pakistanis will better conserve their past. ■

Tahir Jamal White Star