

TOWARDS DIGITIZATION OF CHURCH ARCHIVAL MATERIALS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

It is often said that “People must know the past to understand the present and face the future”. This statement more particularly suits to the church archival materials which depict and reflect the church heritage. In this paper an attempt has been made to present an overview of church archival materials in India in general and the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore in particular. It is based on a questionnaire survey. The survey covered various church archives in India. It has been found that in almost all church archives in India the archival materials are not effectively stored and preserved. Therefore, keeping in view, the present state of affairs in the care and maintenance of church archival materials and with the available technology, it is proposed to go in for ‘digitization’ as a means of preservation of church archival materials. In this context, the concept of digitization and its advantages, the hardware and software required for digitization, and the processes have been explained. Further, the type of archival materials to be digitized has been specified. The paper, concluding that in view of the effectiveness of digitization as a means of preservation, urges that in this new millennium the church archives in India should go in for digitization.

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0. Definition of Archives

Archives, defined as the records of any institution, public or private, preserved because of their value. The Greek word “archeion” was originally applied to Government records (public archives). There are also records generated by families and individuals, which are generally described as “private” or “personal papers”. The term archives is also used to designate an agency or administrative unit responsible for identifying, appraising, accessioning, preserving, arranging, describing and providing reference service on archives material, and for approving the destruction of records of transitory value.

1. Church Archives

In the Church, archives are places of memory of the Christian community and storehouse of cultural heritage. As places of memory archives must systematically gather all the data making up the articulated history of the Church community so that what has been done, the results obtained, may be properly evaluated. The Code of Canon Law (Canon Law

Society 1983) gives suitable norms for the diligent conservation and care management of archival sources. The documents preserved in the archives of the Catholic Church represent an immense and precious heritage. This is shown by the great number of archives which have been instituted by the presence and activity of Bishops in the Episcopal cities.

The responsibility for documenting material is assigned primarily to individual Church entities. This makes it necessary to establish suitable criteria for management of historic archives, protection and conservation of the secret archives, and their proper organization. There should be a set up for computerization of data, which needs assistance of technical experts and qualified personnel. Information about the collection should be circulated among various archives. Participation in national and international Archive associations is important. Availability of the collection for consultation and research, should be promoted.

The primary concern regarding Church archives is certainly to preserve such precious heritage with care in order that it may be handed down to future generations. The distinction of the material gathered demonstrates the capillary activity of the Church community.

2. Nature of Church archival materials in India: An overview

In India, there are about 139 church archives situated in all the headquarters of ecclesiastical provinces. Further there are 6,277 small archives maintained by individual churches (Catholic Directory of India, 1998). Apart from these there are 295 archives maintained by the Catholic Religious Orders (Brothers and Nuns).

The authors, as part of major study on church archives, have conducted a survey through questionnaire. It was found that a variety of archival materials are available and can be categorized as primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include account books, baptism registers (birth), burial registers (death), marriage registers, correspondence, diaries, journals and periodicals, palm leaves, parchment, property deeds, travelogues; while the secondary sources are almanacs, directories, hand books, manuals, monographs and some rare books.

The account books, baptism registers (birth), burial registers (death), marriage registers, correspondence, diaries, journals and periodicals, property deeds, directories and manuals are in large numbers and sources like palm leaves, parchment, travelogues, almanacs, hand books, monographs and some rare books are not many.

3. Condition of the archival materials in church archives in India: A case study

To study the condition of archival materials, one of the ancient church archives in South India, Archives of the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore, established in year 1606 A D has been chosen. In this archives there are about 119 directories dating from 1851 up to

1996. It holds around 470 volumes of different types of registers namely baptism from (1742), marriage (1762), accounts and inventories (1772) and loose sheets (both manuscripts and typewritten) are stored in two hundred boxes each containing about two hundred sheets. They date back to 17th century. Two thirds of the collection is written in Latin, Portuguese and French, one third of the collection is in English and very few records are written in Tamil and Bengali.

The archival holdings has significant preservation problems – most of the records are in acidic folders or clamped with corrosive fasteners and bundled with highly acidic and brittle paper. Due to tropical climate, the archival records have become very brittle. Eighty percent of the records are infested with silver fish, book worms. The physical, chemical and biological factors are also contributing to the deterioration of records.

The survey indicates that almost all the church archives in India in general and Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore in particular have the same problems. The condition of the records is almost same. The records are not stored in proper containers. The records are placed in highly acidic cardboard boxes wrapped in acidic envelopes. The humidity is not controlled. Due to lack of finance, no proper preservation techniques are employed. Neither are there airconditioners, nor proper shelves.. The personnel incharge of the archives have no understanding of techniques of preservation. Therefore, there is an urgent need for not only preserving the original sources, but also make them usable in different forms. One of the feasible way of preservation of archival records is through microfilming. It is internationally accepted and practiced form of preservation. However, the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) has changed the whole scenario of conservation of archival materials. In order to provide effective solutions to the problem of conservation and diffusion of the historical heritage it is suggested to go in for “digitization”. The development and application of digital technology to the collection, storage, retrieval and dissemination processes of archival information has gained recognition during the last few years in the western the world.

4. Digitization as a means of preservation of archival materials

4.1 What is digitization?

The digitization of images is still a new technique but is clearly the technology of the future. It is a representation of the physical image of the document created by means of a scanner preserved in binary form on a electronic medium, and then ‘interpreted’ by a computer to be read on screen or printed out on paper.

Advantages of digitization

- ? the image integrated into electronic system enhances access to information;
- ? the image being composed of digits can be processed with mathematical algorithms to improve quality and legibility;
- ? with this process one can create large databases with images embedded into it;
- ? copies can be made from copies without any loss of information or quality;

- ? information can be disseminated on network and published in electronic format;
- ? compact storage – saves space;
- ? added security.

4.3 Hardware and software requirement for digitization

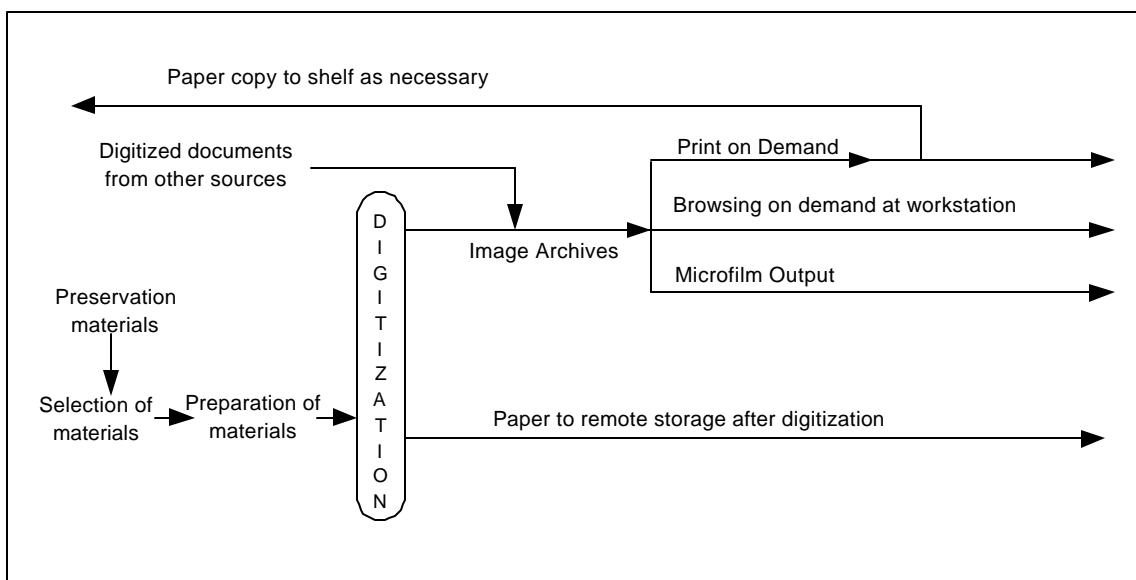
The hardware requirements are computer(s), Scanner(s), Zip drive and CD-ROM recorder/writer. The PC system based on processors of type Pentium 1 or higher with 550 MHz, with Window 95 or higher, 64 MB ram and a hard disk 10 GB and above. The size of the monitor screen should be at least 17 inches diagonally. Normal PC screens with 14 inches are unsuitable for image representation. The resolution capacity of normal PC colour screens is about 75 dpi. Large screens specially for image work can reach higher resolution up to 120 dpi. Flat bed scanners are preferred to sheet fed scanners. Scanners have capability to scan at different resolutions. 300 dpi is good enough for text, while 600 dpi is adequate for pictures, drawings and maps.

For access to digitized images, various viewing and manipulation software programmes are available. Imaging for Windows is a feature available at no extra charge with Window 95. Other examples of suitable software are Pix View 2.1, ScanMos uvp, Hijaak Pro 2.0, Pro View 2.0 and so on. As a rule, viewer software should have the following features: page-turning forward and backward; use of the whole screen for display; magnification and reduction of the whole image and of selected parts of the image; option of return to the original image; image rotation; image inversion; and display of technical information from the headers, such as picture size, resolution, format, bit depth, and print. Option of image conversion into other formats and of image compression is also very important.

4.4 Digitization process:

First of all the documents have to be selected and the material for digitization has to be prepared. The documents should be made free of dirt and stains, foldings have to be carefully straightened. The document is scanned and a group of Charged Coupled Devices (CCD) covers the image of the document analyzing all characters as a combination of black spots (from which derives the use of the word ‘raster’), each one identifiable by its spatial coordinates. For each of these individualized spots the scanner analyses and measures the density according to a given greyscale or colour scale in case of coloured originals.

To convert the image of the text into an ASCII file the text image requires to be further processed through Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software. The ASCII text then may be edited through an html editor. For assigning html tags human intervention is necessary. Through the html tags hyperlinks within the document may be established. Wherever required the graphic material has to be incorporated as TIFF (Tagged Image File Format) bit-maps. The complete database of full text material accompanied by uncompressed images has to be stored on optical disks as master files.



Source : Commission on Preservation and Access (1991)

Digitization chain

For regular use, a second set of full text data with images compressed as JPEG (Joint Photographics Experts Group) file has to be developed. The master file with uncompressed data is for archiving and future migration.

4.5 What is to be digitized?

The archive materials are to be selected which have the administrative, fiscal, legal, historical and sacramental value. All the records having these values are to be considered for digitization. For example: the Baptism (birth) registers, Marriage registers and Burial (death) registers have the sacramental value in the Church and to its members. These records are to be preserved for centuries. Many use these records to trace their family tree and so on.

5. Conclusion

It was found in our survey that only one or two church archives are prepared to consider the use of digital imaging technology as a long-term preservation solution. The greatest promise lies in its use for access purposes and disseminate information to the users. It is in the best of interests of church authorities and church archivists to begin to understand the strengths and limitations of this technology and to participate in establishing guidelines for its use for creating records that will ultimately come under their jurisdiction. Keeping in view of the significance of church archival materials and their present state of storage in India, it is earnestly urged that in this new millennium, the

church archives in India will go in for “Digitization” in order to preserve and disseminate the church heritage.

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