

Preservation Of Archives: A Case Study Of Bangladesh National Archives

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Abstract

Now-a-days, while a mature system of preservation and conservation (PAC) technology and methodology exists world wide to achieve the systematic PAC of world's cultural heritage, the PAC programs of Bangladesh National Archives (the custodian of Bangladesh Government's records) have excluded the same provisions to sustain the usable life of it's resources. In this circumstance, this study seeks to articulate the current PAC status of archives in Bangladesh National Archives, and examine the barriers that have hindered the development of full-fledged PAC program for them. Finally some recommendations have been put forward at the consideration of Bangladesh National Archives so that it can employ the minimum technologies for proper care of its resources and become gradually able to adopt latest technologies for the preservation of manual archives together with the development of a national digital repository of archives.

Keywords : Archives, Bangladesh National Archives, Conservation, Government Records, National Repository, Preservation.

1. Introduction

Archives constitute one of the world's primary information sources. They arise and grow uniquely out of the activities of any organization or institution, a family or even an individual that have been selected for preservation because they possess enduring value [1]. T. R. Schellenburg defines Archives as those records of any public or private institution which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution [2]. Archives are generally the non-current documents of a nation which are preserved to ensure their survival for future generations after being processed to protect them from deterioration. They are basically the part of culture of a given nation. Therefore, there is a heartiest approach by every nation to uphold their heritage at the sight of world community by the establishment of an archival institution. The establishment of archives in a country facilitates preservation, by the most appropriate techniques, of the country's documentary heritage, increases awareness about the existence and significance of documentary heritage, and assists access to documentary heritage. But due to the irreplaceability of archives as well as the innumerable variations in physical condition and storage need, these materials present a great many challenges to preservation and conservation professionals. In reaction to these ongoing challenges there have been many advances and changes with in the fields of preservation and conservation that allows people to approach these collections more effectively than ever before [3]. Bangladesh National

Archives (BNA), a national body responsible for the restoration and preservation of government records, also confronting several challenges regarding effective preservation of its resources. This study attempts to excavate the preservation and conservation problems of BNA and due solution to these problems.

2. Preservation and Conservation (PAC)

The terms preservation and conservation are often used interchangeably in library and information science literature. Whereas, these two terms have been clearly defined and differentiated by the ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science. According to ALA Glossary conservation is the use of chemical and physical procedures in treatment or storage to ensure the preservation of books, manuscripts, records, and other documents [4]. On the other hand preservation is defined as the activities associated with maintaining library and archival materials for use, either in their original physical form or in some other useable way [5]. It further describes that conservation tends to refer to the techniques and procedures relating to the treatment of books and other documents to maintain as much as possible or feasible the original physical integrity of the physical object or artifact. Preservation tends to include conservation but also comprehends techniques of partial preservation of the physical objects (e.g. a new binding), as well as procedures for the substitution of the original are at least partially preserved [6].

Preservation, therefore, refers to the use of passive non-interventative measures for the protection of an archive. This is achieved by providing appropriate environmental conditions, storage facilities and suitable packaging materials etc. whereas conservation is the use of active physical measures to prevent the further deterioration of an archive, i.e. using chemicals and professional repair techniques.

Some are of the opinion that preservation is a preventive process of deterioration and conservation is a curative process of deterioration. At present there is growing consensus towards inclusion of conservation within preservation, as John P Baker states, conservation seems more specific and object-oriented whereas preservation is a broader concept that embraces conservation as well as protection, maintenance and restoration in its meaning [7].

3. Objectives of the Study

This study has been carried out with the aim:

- 1) to assess the existing state of resources and services of Bangladesh National Archives (BNA).
- 2) to examine the prevailing preservation and conservation (PAC) methods in BNA
- 3) to find out the barriers that have hindered the development of full-fledged PAC program for BNA.

- 4) to determine priority actions in the form of recommendations those should be undertaken to overcome these barriers.

4. Methodology

The Study is based on both primary and secondary information. Secondary information has been collected from various documents such as books, journal articles, BNA's official records, brochures, etc. On the other hand primary data collection is based on semi-structured interviews with the personnel of Bangladesh National Archives and Bangladesh National Library. Stacks were also visited to depict the real situation of the resources.

5. A Short Overview of Bangladesh National Archives

5.1 Origin and Development

Bangladesh National Archives was established in 1973 immediately after the emergence of a new sovereign country, Bangladesh in 1971. BNL was put under the administrative control of the Directorate of Archives and Libraries and it conducted its activities with Bangladesh National Library (BNL) in a hired house till 1985. These two organizations were shifted to their own building with the stack capacity of 1,05,000 square feet at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Agargaon at the end of 1985. But even then the two huge national repositories were suffering from acute storage capacity problem. Later in July, 1995 Bangladesh Govt. approved a project, which demanded a separate archives building in the premise of Directorate of Archives and Libraries. Under this project the foundation stone of the archives building was laid in 2001 and construction was completed in June, 2004. This new archive building has two wings: Twelve storied stack building and five storied administrative building. In the first phase, four stories of stack and two stories of administrative Building were completed. BNA has been shifted to its new building in 2005.

5.2 Objectives of Bangladesh National Archives

The main objectives of Bangladesh National Archives, as stated in its official brochure, are:-

1. To ensure official custody and physical safety of the archives of all public offices and to make them available for reference and research;
2. To serve as the legal depository of all the records of the Government;
3. To increase knowledge by providing information to the government agencies and to the public;
4. To strive for efficiency and economy in the administrative machinery through systematic and proper management of modern records of the government agencies [8].

5.3 Functions

The principal functions of the National Archives (according to brochure) are:

1. To acquire and preserve government and private collections;
2. To provide research facilities for the administrators and Researchers and the public;
3. To provide technical and scientific advice on conservation and restoration of records, books and other documentary materials;
4. To give advice to public offices on records and Archive Managements;
5. To promote writers, researches by awarding prizes and organizing exhibitions of records etc.
6. To inspect, examine and appraise the records of government agencies and determine the records to be retained or destroyed;
7. To serve as the National Repository for Archival materials and to act as the custodian for the preservation and conservation of the Nation's documentary cultural heritage;
8. To co-ordinate and maintain linkage with similar foreign organizations [9].

5.4 Collections

Bangladesh National Archives perhaps has the largest collection of the Bangladesh Government's records. This has become possible for BNA due to the National Archives Ordinance Passed in 1983. According to the article no 9 (2-d) of this ordinance, "It shall be the duty of the responsible officer of any public office or any other person for the time being having custody of any public records to transfer such records, being records not less than 25 years old, as required by the Director to be transferred to the National Archives for permanent preservation" [10]. This ordinance has helped BNA to collect various government records from different administrative branches of the government such as different district records dated from 1760-1900, Divisional Commissioner records dated 1898-1971, government publications, gazettes, estate records of old zamindars, old maps, East Pakistan and Bangladesh period records, old newspapers: dailies and weeklies, press clippings etc.

5.5 Budget

There is a joint budget allocation for the national archives of Bangladesh and the national library of Bangladesh. This total budget is then distributed by the internal authority according to priority with approval from the Ministerial committee. BNA enjoys 35% to 40% of the total budget. The budget allocation and expenditure of Directorate of Archives and Libraries for the last five years were as below:

Table 1 : Budget Allocation

Fiscal Year	Budget Allocation	Expenditure
2003-04	1,29,92,000	1,20,08,000
2004-05	1,19,29,000	1,19,55,000
2005-06	1,48,41,000	1,45,26,000
2006-07	1,75,78,000	1,69,79,000
2007-08	1,81,40,000	1,70,05,000

5.6 Organization and Manpower

BNA comprises eight divisions namely: Archives Administration, Records Management, Preservation & Conservation, Microfilming / Reprography, Repositories, Public Relations, Exhibitions, General Administration. In operation of these eight divisions there is an allocation of twenty six personnel of which significant posts remaining vacant for a long time. The real picture is shown through the following structure (In this structure STA refers to Senior Technical Assistant, JST refers to Junior Technical Assistant and these posts are equivalent to clerical posts):

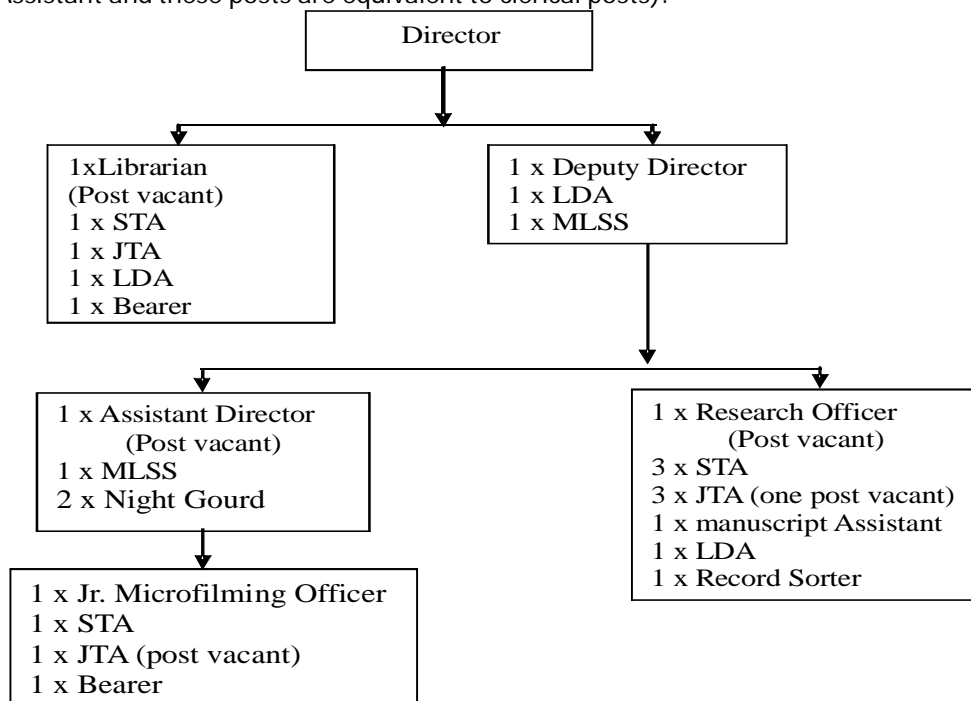


Figure 1: Organogram of Bangladesh National Archives

6. Preservation State in Bangladesh National Archives

The basic function of Bangladesh National Archives is to preserve the printed heritage for the future generations. For this purpose there is a separate division entitled "Preservation and Conservation" to perform physical, chemical, reprographic and digital conservation works in the National Archives. Being the custodian of country's governmental records BNA authority pursues different govt. offices for the collection of records. This duty is performed by the Director or Deputy Director with the help of one or two of his/her subordinate. They visited different offices, select important records and bring them to BNA. These materials are firstly made dust free and repaired so far as possible. To protect them from pests these records are fumigated and the final products are either kept in hard paper boxes or tight together with wooden board on both side of the bundle. The temperature of stack is controlled through air conditioning. For identification of these records district or document wise registers are maintained. There is a microfilming division but BNA has not got its microfilming machinaries yet.

7. Findings and Discussion

Most of the resources of BNA are made of paper, although some are made of palm leaf, metals etc. These materials are at risk from:

- ◆ Direct physical forces, such as wear and tear
- ◆ Thieves, vandals and displacers
- ◆ Fire – usually with catastrophic results
- ◆ Water – damage from leaks and floods
- ◆ Pests, such as wood-boring or carpet beetle
- ◆ Contaminants, such as atmospheric pollutants
- ◆ Radiation, in the form of ultraviolet and infra-red light cause fading
- ◆ Incorrect temperatures. Cooler temperatures usually increase longevity, higher temperatures increase decay
- ◆ Incorrect humidity. Stable humidity is best for preservation
- ◆ Custodial neglect, by owners, collectors and stewards - resulting in damage

BNA is the overseer of these risks. In accordance with the terms of the National Archives Ordinance, Bangladesh, the fundamental responsibility of BNA is to collect, preserve, maintain and administer the records of the government. Thus to fulfill this mandate to preserve and maintain government records, the National Archives of Bangladesh was to carry out an extensive preservation program. But BNA has failed to introduce the simplest preservation methods to extend the life of its resources. This survey reveals several factors responsible for the current situation among which insufficient and ineligible personnel is main. This staff limitation and ineligibility cause several problems. Firstly,

due to staff limitation the chief officials have to go for record collection that hampers other administrative activities. Secondly, due to absence of expert staff in terms of PAC, valuable records are going to stack without proper treatment resulting rapid deterioration. Thirdly, the less qualified staff is unable to assess the above risks and to influence respective authority about the real needs though some of them have foreign training on archives and records management. Another important finding is lack of its physical facilities. The brochure of BNA shows that there are eight divisions but all these divisions is not alive except administration, repository and microfilming. There is no standard laboratory to protect and stabilize the condition of incoming records so that there is no further deterioration of resources. There is air conditioning facility without any back up and exposure of document is done without any environmental control. This contributes to a large scale to the deterioration of important resources. Budget also greatly hinders the effective management of BNA. BNA enjoys a joint budget with BNL which is too little to its management. One major factor regarding the inefficiency of BNA is lack of policy framework. BNA is still conducting based on the National Archives Ordinance passed in 1983 which is obsolete enough to conduct such organization of modern times. Lack of in-service training, institutional cooperation and professional attitudes are some other factors causing the status deterioration of BNA. Staffs were found detached from actual preservation activities as they do not have the required knowledge for proper maintenance of archives and reluctant in maximum cases to cooperate with other institutions or individuals in fear of their status problems. The most important finding of this study is the absence of any initiatives toward the digitization of archives and the archiving of digital heritage. Though BNA authority claims that they implemented a project for the digitization of BNA but it was an unsuccessful job which gets to an end without any significant development of digitization.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

BNA tries to preserve govt. records which are already in weak and brittle condition after minimum twenty five years careless storage. Therefore dust cleaning and fumigation will not be all to the preservation of these resources in stead effective PAC program should be developed that will enable them to remain in suitable condition for several centuries rather than becoming brittle or unusable in only fifty to a hundred years. Therefore conceiving the importance of archives the government should come forward to create some ground for effective restoration and housing of our cultural resources. It is fact that managing any thing requires a significant relevant infrastructure, meaning both gear and people. The provision of a technical infrastructure and the need for economies of scale is one of the many thorny policy questions under discussion in the archives management community today. It will be impossible for the Bangladesh National archives to survive with a prestige if the following remedial measures are not taken immediately:

1. Top priority should be given to the development of human resources. Qualified personnel should

be recruited as well as regular training program should be organized to refresh their knowledge and to be acquainted with the latest methods of archives management.

2. BNA's preservation efforts are to be coordinated with those of other national libraries, research libraries, museums. Nation wide preservation awareness program through workshops, seminars and refresher courses to safeguard the rich cultural and documentary heritage of the country should be arranged.
3. Required infrastructure should be ensured for the preservation as well as handing of the archives. There should be a modern laboratory equipped with latest technological facilities required for effective conservation of archives. An effective preservation section should be devised equipped with expert personnel who will monitor environmental conditions in stack areas to ensure that they meet preservation specifications. There should be spacious rooms with standard set up for the use of archives. Prevention is better than cure. If careful storage and use can be assured this will help to avoid the need for conservation treatment.
4. There should be standard policies regarding what records will be automatically available to the public, what will be available on request and what will be refused (for logical and cogent reasons) so as to help organizations to understand what really needs to be confidential and what does not
5. International cooperation should be build up in order to improve the preservation and conservation activities through organization of training program in cooperation with the similar institution of other developed or developing countries.

Through cooperation and coordination with archives authority and government as well as international community let us develop and nourish long life for our cultural heritage and uphold our heritage to the world.

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