

ACCESSIBLE ARCHIVES

Lakshmi Subramanian

(Jamia Millia Islamia, India)

Lakshmi Subramanian relates the pleasures of going down with archival fever in South Africa.

Dust by Carolyn Steedman, captured for many of us the magic and ineffability of working in archives – a place where senses and sensibilities were unexpectedly aroused – when one suddenly experienced a sense of euphoria when documents seemed to jump up to demonstrate exactly the story that you were conjuring up unconsciously. As a practicing historian who was trained in the best tradition of empirical research which taught you to invest in the archive the definitive, magisterial voice that thereafter guided you through the labyrinth of confusion and theoretical formulation, I was used to working the archive, and in the archives, and lamenting its limits, all simultaneously. No one archive was the same – despite the ordering principle that structured its contents and their arrangement – the idiosyncrasies of location always ensured that as a user you ran into the unexpected that was not always easy to circumvent. Working out of India you could not always be certain that the documents you wanted were there: the rationale of space and authority dealt with paper, dead paper at that, in a manner that you could not always comprehend. On the other hand, you also stood a fair chance of encountering that bibliophile clerk who knew every document and who gave you access to his private knowledge in a way that no public index could.



Library Archives
Photo: Flickr/Pete Ashton

Consequently, as I came to work in the archives in South Africa, I was not entirely sure of what to expect. My confusion was worse confounded as I debated with colleagues and friends about methodology, the difficulties of working with testimonies and oral depositions, and the challenges thrown to methodological issues by politics and academic concerns in a post apartheid era. My own research interests remained strongly grounded within the first half of the twentieth century and Indian journalistic initiatives, and I was fairly confident that I would be able to access more than what I needed for the moment.

My confidence was partly bolstered by the splendid on-line catalogue that was available, but what made the experience even more memorable was the attitude of the archival staff. Not only did they respond to emails, they were especially prompt in giving you what you wanted and at extraordinary reasonable rates.

the sense that here was a space that mattered was palpable

But that was not all: the ease with which the staff were prepared to give you digital access revealed a philosophy of archival culture that I have never encountered before. The motto was simple: the material is for you to use and not for us to market. Translated that meant minimum officiousness about permission for researchers, and maximum assistance for you to know the archives that you were using. The novelty of such an interactive attitude got me thinking and I went back to the mission statement that accompanied the setting up of the National Archives and Record Services of South Africa in 1996. As I had come to expect by now, the mission statement was framed competently, but more impressive was its conceptual amplification, namely, that in its intention to preserve a national archival heritage resource for use by the government and its citizen subjects, was a recognition of the actual importance of allowing an individual and a collective social memory to be made available as best as possible. A post-script to that was ensuring wide and extensive accessibility to all – a feature that made my visit to the archives (and I visited and worked in several) more than just productive but intellectually and socially engaging. As I worked along with other researchers



Library Archives 05

Photo: Flickr/Pete Ashton

– some working on their doctoral theses, others retrieving their family histories – the sense that here was a space that mattered was palpable, leaving me to recall Michel Foucault's musings on the magical qualities of archives, their ability to function as a reflection that shows us quite simply, and in shadows, what all those in the foreground are looking at.

I am happy to have had this intimate experience – to have been once more a patient of archival fever, and particularly to have experienced it in South Africa.