

International Notes

Edited by Ewan Maidment

Editor's Note

This issue, International Notes is devoted to a lengthy report on Bangladesh archives from Florus Geraedts who is involved with the Bangladesh Archives Management Project and undertook a consultancy on the improvement of the management of the National Archives in Dhaka in 1996. His work has parallels with that of Peter Arfanis in Cambodia. Florus has asked any readers who have archival experience in South Asia to get in touch with him (c/- Municipal Archives of Leidschendam, Eikvaren 17, 4102 XE Culemborg, The Netherlands (fax 31 703 201 302).

Archives in Bangladesh: The Past and Present of a Young State¹

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Does Bangladesh really need archives and records?

The absence of archives and records management in Bangladesh inevitably leads to national, regional and local administration functioning without proper records and therefore being unable to adequately inform either the public service or the public. The negative consequences of this neglect of the public memory of Bangladesh devastate public life. It is impossible to generate data to make well

considered and efficient policy, thus continuously crippling the public service. The public, the citizens of Bangladesh, are continually and structurally hampered in obtaining knowledge about their own legal positions and the duties and responsibilities of the authorities. These particular problems, among others, poison both political life and legal relationships in Bangladesh.

Yet few current analyses recognise that poor management of records and archives is a very important cause of the deficiencies of the political and legal system. From this point of view, explicitly formulated by the Bangladesh Centre for Local Studies (BCLS), structural improvement of archives and records management is required to strengthen the institutional and social development of Bangladesh². Furthermore, archives and records management is the main pre-condition for the development of historical knowledge, one of the decisive prerequisites for development policy.

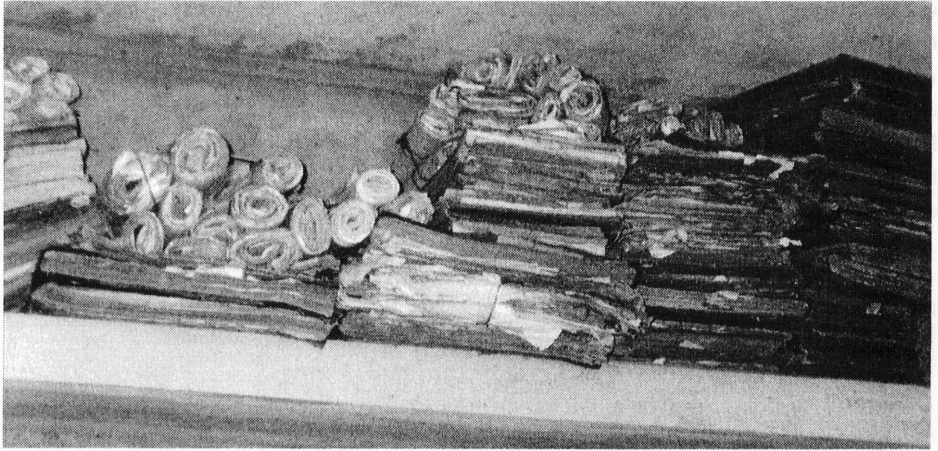
Archives and records management in Bangladesh needs strong impetus in order to promote:

- control of records existing outside of Dhaka, stored in the District Record Rooms and Record Rooms of the regional and local administrations (see photograph of record keeping at Foodgodown);
- control of records, produced since 1905, especially after the termination of British colonial rule and the Indo-Pakistan partition in 1947; and
- information management by national, regional and local governments.

The history of archives and records in Bangladesh

Several parts of the Indian subcontinent, Bengal in particular, did have a history of local and regional government before the advent of the Mogul Empire. During the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries Bengal towns, municipalities and villages had local administrations. The historical record shows the incorporation of Bengal into the Mogul Empire resulted in the alteration but not the complete decline of local administration³. The establishment of British colonial rule strangled the development of autonomous local administrations. At the same time British colonial policy stimulated local administrations which were subordinate to and accomplices of the British Raj and therefore irrelevant to the historical processes within the Bengal economy, society and politics. Thus local and regional organisations produced

records without a real consciousness of the relevance of these records to Bengali history. Today, some Bangladeshi politicians and political scientists are paying attention to the need to develop meaningful and at least partially autonomous local and regional governments. The building of this kind of decentralised government is closely related to systematic keeping of records and archives.



*Record keeping at a Foodgodown near Srimangal in North East Bangladesh, 1995.
Photograph courtesy Florus Geraedts.*

There must be some archives left in Bangladesh, at least of the Mogul Empire and the regional princes and zamindars in Bengal from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. The archives of the V.O.C. (the Dutch East Indian Company), stored in the General State Archives at The Hague, contain letters from the Moguls, high ranking officers at the Mogul's court and several Nawabs in Bengal, where the V.O.C. had several *factorijen* (establishments). Since the VOC archives contain outward letters from the Mogul Court, there must be originals (or minutes) in the Mogul's Chancelry. Several manuscript collections stored in libraries and museums in Bangladesh contain documents belonging to the Mogul state records, but their proper identification as archival documents is very much hampered by the descriptions in the inventories shown to me, for example, at the Manuscript Department of the Dhaka University Library.

The constitutional development of Bengal under the British Raj took place gradually and uninterrupted over almost two centuries (1757-1947). During this

time the colonial regime developed a policy on the management of records and archives. As far as is known, the oldest records (partially) available in the repositories of the Bangladeshi National Archives were generated by the District Collectors from the 1760s. The British colonial institutions followed regulations on records management initiated in 1793. The National Archives of India came into existence in 1891. So there was an opportunity for the development of records and archives keeping in the Indian parts of the British Empire. There are several traces dating back to the beginning of this century of attempts by the Bengal government to survey 'old records' stored in the so-called District Record Rooms. The results of these inquiries were poor, due to the ignorance of the officers and the vagueness of the forms of inquiry. However these experiences may be very helpful when preparing and undertaking a new survey of archives and records.

The authorities set great store on proper management of contemporary records. The Bengal government promulgated a handbook on record keeping in 1937, reissued in 1943. Professor Dr Ratan Lal Chakraborty, of the Department of History of Dhaka University, has drawn attention to some documents of the colonial government of Bengal, drawn up over the period 1902-1943, which reveal a tradition of skillful management of records and archives. Unfortunately, this archival tradition was almost completely wiped out in 1947. The partition of India and Pakistan has not only complicated the custodial arrangements for great parts of the Indian archival corpus, but has also frustrated the development of both archives and record keeping in Bangladesh to this very day.

The 1947 partition resulted in a lack of experienced and educated public servants in Pakistan so the record keeping routines at all levels of the Pakistan government and administration almost disappeared. Rebuilding a minimally functioning bureaucracy in West Pakistan took at least ten years. East Pakistan (the former East Bengal) became a sort of colony, dominated and exploited by West Pakistan. Consequently, no normal quantitative and qualitative development of the public service took place during the period 1947-1971 due to the absence of the usual range of government institutions.

Archival development also stagnated between 1947 and 1971. The Pakistan government established a National Archives Repository in Karachi, but no East Pakistan branch was ever set up. It has to be considered an ominous sign that no archival legislation at all was enacted during the period of a united Pakistan⁴. In December 1971 Bangladesh became an independent state after a short though quite violent war. After only 14 months the Bangladesh National Archives was established.

This dynamic approach by the government of the new state demonstrated a certain consciousness of the importance of the management of archives.

A great deal of research into and analysis of the history of archives and records management in Bangladesh still has to be done. Dr Karim, Dr Sirajul Islam, Dr Chakraborty and others have already collected many relevant documents and have published on this subject. Mr Shahabuddin, of the National Archives, is working on a history of the National Library and Archives from 1973 to the present, which was due to be issued in December 1996. Dr Chakraborty is preparing a history of the History Department of Dhaka University, a study which may reveal the relation between historiography, history teaching, historical heuristics and the use of archival sources in Bangladesh.

As far as my present inquiry allows⁵, I can make the following observations on the development of the Bangladeshi National Archives:

1. At the very beginning of Bangladesh as an independent state, politicians were willing to give a certain priority to the establishment of the National Archives. The National Archives was first located in a hired building on Elephant Road. In 1986 the National Archives was given a new site which was more convenient, especially for the storage of the records, in the new National Library building at Agargaon, Sher-e-Bangla-Nagar. The repositories in this building are not air-conditioned. Conservation of documents and maps on paper and parchment urgently needs purified air, kept at a certain (and constant) temperature and degree of humidity. The repositories' cleanliness also leaves much to be desired. At present the restoration of volumes, files, maps and press clippings consumes many staff hours and much of the budget of the National Archives Agency. There is a battery of acid chests filled with documents and volumes for fumigation. This treatment has to be repeated often. I have been told that the capacity of the battery is insufficient. However the possibility of the documents being damaged by this treatment, is even more alarming. Instead of frequently destroying insects and mildew, it would be better to prevent or diminish their growth by maintaining the records at a safe level of temperature and humidity. In March, one of the archivists, Mr Samad, showed me the proposed site of a the new National Archives building. The construction was planned to start in July 1996.
2. The first Director of the Bangladesh National Archives, Dr Karim, realised the importance of affiliating the National Archives with the international

world of archival institutions. So the National Archives became a member of the International Council of Archives in 1973. Dr Karim was also one of the initiators of the SWARBICA regional branch of ICA set up in 1976. Furthermore, he participated in the Regional Coordinating Committee of the Guide to the Sources of Asian History from its beginning in 1979. Dr Karim was also a member of the Bangladesh National Guide Committee, linked with the Regional Coordinating Committee.

3. Dr Karim attended several training courses in England and the USA during the years 1975-1981. The deputy director of Archives and some other staff members also attended archival training courses abroad, for example in India. However, the lack of education and training in archives administration in Bangladesh itself has inhibited the development of archival training.
4. Quite an important step forward was made in 1983 when the government promulgated a National Archives Ordinance (made by the Chief Martial Law Administrator on 15 August; published by the Ministry of Law and Land Reforms on 18 August; Ordinance No. XXXIX of 1983). This Ordinance specifies the competence and duties of the Director and his staff. The regulations prescribe a definition of records and archives. The National Archives in the capital, Dhaka, is the only establishment recognised under the Ordinance. The Ordinance compels the transfer of specified records to the National Archives. It also stipulates the authority of the Director over non-transferred records in the charge of officials. Thus, the Archives Ordinance obliges the government and all its agencies to take care of their records. Though lacking in some respects, this Archives Ordinance should be considered as a useful tool. However, the annual reports of the National Archives show few signs of an effective concern for the management of records still held by the administrative agencies and institutions of the government.
5. Compilations of inventories and surveys of archives, records and collections of manuscripts, both public and private, have been negligible due to staff shortages. At the moment, no total directory of records, archives and collections of manuscripts in Bangladesh is available.
6. A guide book on the Bangladesh National Archives was issued in 1994, under the auspices of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Large scale distribution of this National Archives brochure, which contains a description of the tasks, the organisational structure laid down by the National Archives

Ordinance, and a survey of the most important records available to visitors and researchers, would be a step forward. This booklet was issued on the occasion of an exhibition of the National Archives in Dhaka. The Guide Preparation Committee has been recently working on a more extended version containing data on the institutional history and functions of the agencies of public administration.

7. Proper processing of records to be transferred to National Archives repositories has recently commenced, but with reluctance due to lack of knowledge and experience in records management in the institutions and agencies which are to transfer their records. Such transfers need the efficient selection of records. An example of this, as depicted in the photograph, was shown to me by some members of National Archives staff who were preparing to transfer 600m of records, 1880-1975, from the municipal administration of Dhaka. These records, in particular those from the years 1880-1920, are in extremely bad condition due to the filthiness, high temperature and humidity of their present repository. Microfilming of these documents and subsequent storage of the originals would enable access to the records in the future and their conservation in the long term.

The Bangladesh Archives and Records Management Project

A special project, the Bangladesh Archives and Records Management Project (BARM), is being undertaken for the conservation and maintenance of archives and records older than 10 years.

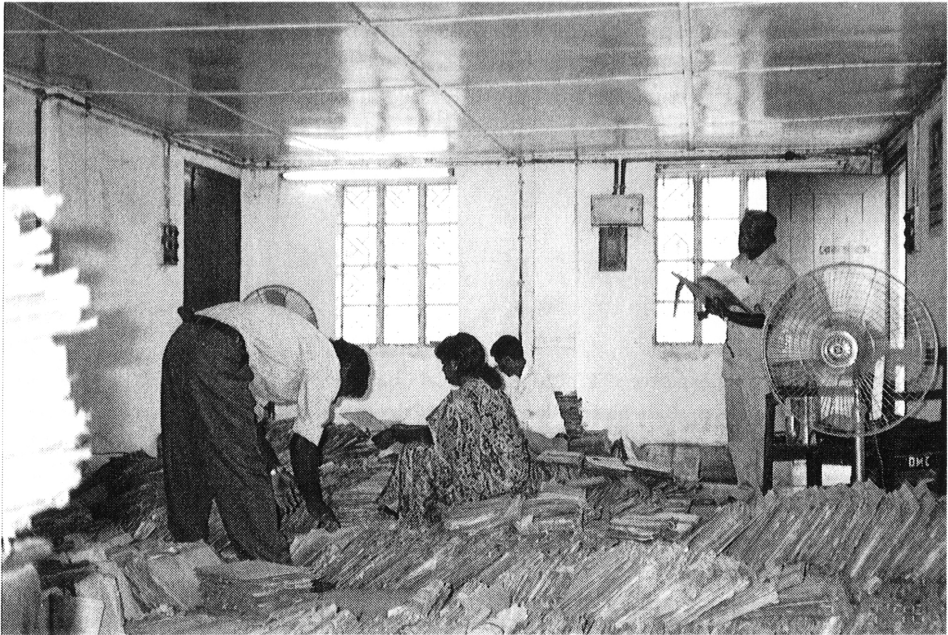
The management of archives and records includes:

- organisation of the transfer of records to the National Archives;
- storage of archives and records in appropriate buildings;
- restoration of paper, parchment and registers;
- proper packing of records;
- making records accessible for easy reference; and
- education of archival staff.

All these activities are to be performed in accordance with the National Archives Ordinance 1983. The actual management needs improvement in all respects. The first task will be to devise and draw up a plan which will contain all the above-mentioned topics.

A condition *sine qua non* for the creation and implementation of a good and effective BARM Project Plan is a survey of all records and archives in Bangladesh in order to determine the quantity and quality of the records and archives. Only after this is done will it be possible to determine staff levels, storage capacities and budgets. Such a survey must also gather information on the administrative organisations which have generated, and in several cases continue to generate, the records. Collecting and publishing this data on the institutional framework serves two purposes:

- identifying the organisations which have to take responsibility (as formulated in the National Archives Ordinance 1983) for delivering (part of) the



Storage of records of Dhaka City Corporation, 1880-1975, before selection and transfer to the National Archives. Archivists from the National Archives and Record Room staff of the Dhaka municipality are selecting files, 1996. Photograph courtesy Florus Geraedts.

financial and personal resources needed to take good care of the records; and

- creating conditions for an appropriate identification of the record groups necessary for the proper administration of the records.

Hidden in all kinds of government buildings, record rooms, private houses and schools are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of metres of documents and registers, possibly dating back to pre-colonial times, waiting for discovery and proper treatment. Most important, they are waiting for research and publication which will add to Bangladesh's history. Yet our concerns should also, or perhaps even more so, be directed towards records generated since 1971.

Preparing such a nationwide survey may seem to be a difficult task; it is certainly a challenge to all people interested in cultural heritage, history and education. It will also be a challenge to politicians and public officers, political scientists and historians motivated to improve the political, juridical and administrative life of Bangladesh. Collecting the data in such a survey will also stimulate the development of a network of people, professionally or personally interested in improving archives and records management. Such a network will be vital when encouraging national, regional and local governments to pay effective attention to the development of archives and records management. During my visits to Bangladesh, I found that it is realistic to expect such a lobby to become active, even on a large scale.

Endnotes

- 1 Thanks to the great expertise of Professor Ratan Lal Chakraborty and especially his unselfish and limitless willingness to share his knowledge and experience with me, it became possible to collect data for this analysis of archival problems. Ratan and his wife Kallyani gave me their friendship and revealed to me the amiability of Bangladeshi people and culture. I owe my acquaintance with Bangladesh and the opportunity to do research on archives and records management in Bangladesh to my beloved friends Mr Joost Andriessen and Mrs Marjo Lamers, both of the Netherlands Embassy in Dhaka. I remember with deeply felt gratitude their generous hospitality, sustenance and encouragement.
- 2 The Bangladesh Centre for Local Studies is connected with the History Department of Dhaka University. The Centre was established in 1995 in order to encourage research and publications, regular discussions and an annual seminar on local and regional subjects. Participants in the work of BCLS are university graduates from various professions, in both the private and public sectors.

- 3 Kamal Siddiquy (ed.), *Local Government in Bangladesh*, 2nd ed., University Press, Dhaka, 1994, pp. 24-33.
- 4 *Archivum, Revue Internationale des Archives Publiée*, vol. XX, 1970, p. 215.
- 5 *Annual Reports of the Bangladesh National Archives 1973-1989*.