

Archives, Being and Representation: Studies into the formation and usage of grassroots archives

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‘He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.’ George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty Four* (1949: Chapter III).

Historical studies, ideally, rest on the correspondence between sources (historical threads, traces and artefacts), on one hand, and, on the other, historical writing. This professional protocol markedly distinguishes historical narrative from fiction (Ricoeur 1984, 1988; Munz 1997; Ginzburg 2012); this is despite the relativist claim regarding historical analysis (White 1988; Jenkins 2003; Chatterjee 2001). However, it is equally a case that scholars no longer regard data/fact, source and archive (repository of historical documents) as neutral and unvarnished sources of the ‘truth.’ Historical studies, therefore, combine critical analysis and sceptical appraisal of sources and archives.

The archive, alongside museums and other heritage monuments, is a modern knowledge institution. Modern states are well known for investing in this institution as a depository of records of the historical traces and artefacts. Parallel to such statist institutions, other ‘private archives’ also came into existence from the nineteenth-century onwards. Enterprising persons set up ‘private archives’, consisting of their private papers, personal collection and testimonials. Grassroots archives further expanded the list of ‘private archives’. The former is normally organised and founded by remarkably uncommon activist-men and -women.

The collection of essays in this volume discusses the origin and establishment of grassroots archives. These archives were prepared and founded by some uncommon individuals in post-war Japan. These archives mainly include private collections of records, memorial testimonies and other historical artefacts. These essays outline the connection between the formation of being of the founding persons itself, on one side, and these grassroots archives, on the other. My concluding essay in this volume primarily situates the overall discussion on grassroots archives within the scholarly debates related to our three concerns. These are (1) epistemological claim of historical studies, (2) the nexus between knowledge, power and being, and (3) the operative feature of archival institutions.

1.

What idea of history is embodied in the grassroots archives? Prosperous industrial societies are ‘post-historical’ as per the declaration made by Francis Fukuyama in 1989/1992. Watershed events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe and the consequent retreat of socialist model heralded the ‘end of history’, claims Fukuyama. This ‘end’ is the conclusion of the march of humankind towards freedom and recognition/dignity and the termination of the dialectics between masters and slaves. It is the triumph of liberal [capitalist] democracy, as the only viable and desirable goal as well as means of both the desires for economic prosperity and the struggles for recognition (*thymo*). Fukuyama complicates it further: now onwards, the renewal of history would occur in the realm of the struggles for recognition; it would mainly be driven by *megalothymia* (the desires for privileged and distinguished recognition) rather than by *isothymia* (the desires for equal recognition). The liberal [capitalist] democracy has, indeed, invested so much into the twin principles of liberty and equality, and thereby into *isothymia* that the reaction in the form of *megalothymitic* strivings is a potentially destabilising threat, concludes Fukuyama.

Grassroots archives and their founders in our survey embody a difference with the alluring but insidious con-

cept of history shared by thinkers like Fukuyama for a couple of decades now. These archives, as our discussion above and the rest of other essays, bring out, are an expression of, the first and foremost, the desires for economic improvement as well as the *isothymitic* strivings ‘from below’ from the 1960s onwards in Japan. The knowledge enterprise of the founders of some of these archives aims at advancing a counter-narrative to that of the authorities, that is, coalmine management and the state. It seeks to highlight the excesses, layoffs, occupational hazards and concomitant human losses and the pitfalls of closure borne by the working people. It wishes to preserve what Ginzburg (2012) calls ‘the threads and traces’ of both painful and memorable experiences and struggles of and sacrifices and contributions made by working men and women. It strives for the reappropriation of knowledge and representation, juxtaposed against the better-known historicalities of high growth, the significance of coal industry and miners in this high growth story and that of the rise in the standard of living of commoners in post-war Japan.

The archival initiatives of the founders interrogate the ‘disagreeable’ claims and varnish of liberal [capitalist] democracy in post-war Japan. They contribute to the preservation of diversity and differing memory in the interstices of liberal democracy. Fukuyama may read it as a vehicle of consolidation of and as the virtuous capacity of accommodation witnessed in a capitalist democracy and a critic may also grasp it as an antinomy in the history of post-war Japan. These archives, however, remain a perpetual reminder of the inadequacy and limits of capitalist democracy.

2.

The relativist discourse has *convincingly* debunked some of the aspects of conventional meta-history and grand narratives, with its celebratory emphasis on fragments, perspectivism and the ineluctable nexus between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1982, 2008; Jenkins, 2003). It has persuasively challenged the positivist tradition, the belief in the neutrality of historical threads and traces (in other words, our archives) and also other claims of objectivity in historical writing. Notwithstanding this, the relativist claim is open to critical scrutiny on two counts. One, the non-positivist protocol of correspondence between the historical data and narrative is opposed to any fanciful arbitrariness and facilitates circumscribed choices in the use of sources. Second, the nexus between power and knowledge eventually seduces and confines us to marvelling at the mode of functioning of this nexus; the agenda before us is to look beyond it, towards the objective of this nexus and its consequence for all of us.

Grassroots archives host personal records, testimonials and artefacts which are bound to be selective and fragmentary in the same way as those of the statist institution. Both of them are, furthermore, an embodiment of specific personal and statist public motif-cum-design. Both of them call for critical scrutiny and a mix of reading ‘along the archival grain’ and ‘reading against the grain’ to achieve nuanced historical writing (Stoler 2009).

Grassroots archives represent in one instance an attempt at contending the disregard for the threats of debilitating occupational diseases, such as pneumoconiosis and silicosis and denial of necessary rehabilitation measures to mining people. In another instance, it brings out the painful experience of accidents, strikes, retrenchment and closure, leading to dislocation in the lives of victims. At the same time, it also captures in some other instance the welfare gains secured by the mining people in the late twentieth-century in Kushiro city. All this represents a working-class history and its gender dimension in juxtaposition with the image of a middle-class nation associated with post-war Japan. For the founders, grassroots archives are an opportunity to gain a narrative power by telling their version of the truth, experience to the public. Here, it seeks the re-appropriation of knowledge and the claim on representation before the broader public. They share the awareness that they are stakeholders in an Orwellian contest for justice, recognition and that this contest rests on the deployment of testimony as well as public reasoning.

3.

The four grassroots archives of our survey came into existence in the midst of and, in turn, constitute an intellectual milieu in post-war Japan. Post-war Japan witnessed the development of interests in people’s history and local history. This new cultural pattern encouraged many people to think of themselves as a historical actor and their testimony as historical materials (see Miyamoto’s essay). In this period, mothers and wives rose to become the faces of various movements. The gendered reception of women’s individual histories and activism in the post-war period

also plays a role, for instance, in the archive organised by Matsuo Keiko (see Schieder's essay). The movement of mining museums and industrial heritage sprang up in the 1980s and 90s. It aimed at collecting and archiving documents, artefacts, local experiences and people's memories. It hoped to contribute to regional revitalisation in the centres facing the closure of exhausted mines. The founding members of Kushiro archive were a part of this movement (see Shimazaki's essay). The documentary evidence generated through the court trials participated in by the victims over the damages caused by pneumoconiosis and silicosis became the basis of some other grassroots archive (see Thomann's essay).

These archives are guided by the objective of reappropriation of knowledge and representation by activist-citizens. The collaborating archivist and others are motivated to combat a hierarchical system of preservation and dissemination of knowledge. The quality of records preservation and objective of an archive apart, the modality of arrangement of materials and artefacts in an archive and its usage, it could be said, also has a bearing on historical writing. I am aware of two cases from own researches. For my research on the political activities in an Indian coalfield, I completed the survey of concerned files in the category of home-special and political-special, respectively, in the National archive of India (New Delhi) and Bihar State Archive (Patna). There were few files for the period from the late 1940s onwards. The response from the archivists was, 'possibly, these files are yet not transferred to the archives and would be lying in the 'inaccessible' record rooms of the concerned ministries'. Bemused and baffled I moved on to explore the files of judicial department for the period from the late 1940s where a pleasant surprise awaited me. The court proceedings included the details on political activities of coalminers. Another case is my survey into the private archive of Joseph Stephens, a Swedish construction contractor in latter nineteenth-century western India, which is now located at his estate in Sweden. The archive has two sections viz. Indian records and Swedish records. My research was primarily focused on the former. By sheer chance, I picked up a box of files from the latter connected with the letters from George Stephens, father of Joseph Stephens and found that it included a regular letter exchange between the two, providing me with a consistent bird's eye view of the younger Stephens' life and business in colonial India during the 1860s. The point to make here with relation to the grassroots archives of our current discussion is that a commentary on the broader usage of these archives and the modality of arrangement of materials and testimonials therein still await researchers' attention.

A future visitor to these archives may also like to take a comparative view on these archives on one side and, on the other, the statist archives in Japan. Such visitor may take an interest in the novel and distinguishing historical threads available in grassroots archives vis-a-vis the historical threads and traces available in the state's archives and company archives. Towards the final exercise, such a researcher may undertake interpretation, explanation and narrative architecture in a manner that would bestow meaning to grassroots archive and extend the objective of the founders to a broader world, beyond the mining centres.

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