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# 'Doing History': In and Beyond the Archive

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**Abstract:** *Unpacking an archive is difficult primarily due to its dual presence and functionality. While on one hand, it symbolizes the space/building where records of the past are preserved; on the other hand, an archive itself merges with the records it seeks to preserve thus embodying the past in fragments. Making history or the craft of seeking meaning in the pasts involves an intimate and constant engagement with an archive in both its embodiments. While search for the various versions of 'truth' lies at the core of this connect, it also necessitates being receptive to the silences, omissions and discontinuities that lie embedded in such seemingly uniform and unproblematic representations of the pasts. The identification of an archive with a repository or documents of the past however does not exclude its metaphoric and polemical dimensions and this article elaborates upon such non-material existences by questioning the materiality and fixity of archives. It attempts to interpret the engagement of the researcher with the archive through the theoretical lens of 'intra-action', by emphasizing non-fixity of both the archive and the historian. Focus on archives also problematizes the role of 'facts' in history thus raising questions on the action of the historian and the practices and politics of archiving. Memory and its role in archivization and the concurrent production of knowledge about individuals, communities and nations and in the production of archives per se, feature as a central concern of this essay, as the past or its reconstruction is as much about remembering as about forgetting.[1] The interplay between memory, archivization and discovery/formation of individual/communitarian/national identities thus forms a central piece of this essay the scope of which needs to be situated within my own experiences of working in archives and hence the frames of analyses are chosen to be in sync with my experiential frameworks.*

**Keywords**: Unearthing, Memory, Non-fixity, Intra-action, Archivization, Archons, Non-positivistic, Temporal.

### *Introduction*

Let us begin at the beginning: the title of this article. Read together, *'doing history'* attributes the actor/historian with the verve to stimulate conversations with the past. The use of the present continuous tense, *'doing'*, entails a process of continuing engagement, a ceaseless to and fro motion in which the historian participates, searches and eventually narrativizes. '*Beyond the archive'* takes off from the Derridean understanding of how things don't actually begin in the archives and that we need not necessarily search for beginnings there. The oft-quoted opening premises of his critically acclaimed work 'Archive Fever'[2] speaks of the need and responsibility of a historian to search for 'origins', 'beginnings' and sources outside the archive and in many ways thus test his/her zeal to look beyond the promise of an archive or what the archivist upholds as the past or many pasts. Recognition of extra-archival knowledge of the pasts questions the overarching legitimacy of the materiality of an archive, the latter founded as much on the political dispensation of the times as on the power/discretion of the archivist. Such theoretical underpinnings pre-empt a prior understanding of the etymology and structure of the institution. The Latin term *archivum* or *archium* comes from the Greek *arkheion* originally meaning "a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates…" or the *archons*.[3] These *archons* were believed to be a class of politically powerful individuals who framed laws and in lieu of their official position, offered their private residences for preserving documents/records of the past, necessary for administrative references and otherwise.[4]Definitionally therefore *archives* and *archons* share a common space, the *archons*- predecessors of modern archivists, visualized as 'guardians' of those documents, armed with what Derrida termed as the hermeneutic right and competence to interpret the archives.[5] In modern era with the formation of sovereign nation-states, citizen identities and memories, archives became synonymous with spaces to store 'authentic' records. Francis X. Blouin, Jr.[6] discusses how such visualization of the modern archive grew from an acceptance of a shared space between history and archive. As a 'unified conceptual space', the archive thus came to symbolize the official historical past of a nation and its people. The 'archival turn' in Social Sciences upheld this legitimacy till the rise of a counter perspective— an anti-archival school of scholastic thinking, that ostensibly challenged notions of shared space with historians questioning the role of *archons*/archivists and exploring interdisciplinary non-archival avenues of accessing the past. A host of post-colonial historians looked upon the use of the archive in colonial historiography as politically meditated

and called for subverting that discourse thus casting serious aspersions on the instrumentality of the archive in yielding 'authentic' knowledge of the past.[7] This new thrust was informed by a renewed interest in the role of memory in shaping multiple pasts. As cultural and political subtexts of memories were explored and pre-archival genesis of incidents probed, "records" stored *in* and *as* archives and their concurrent legitimacy came to be read as products of unique political and cultural conditions and compulsions. Gradually academia settled on a rational midpoint as the archive came to be reinstated as one of the fundamental props of historical research in the post anti-archival scholastic turn. Re-invention of archives meant considerable weightage added to its metaphoric and to quote Zachariah, rhetorical value in historical research.[8] The archive henceforth was no more equated with a fixed space for studying the past and instead itself emerged as an object of study and analysis in which space and time were important indicators of analysis. While Derrida is often credited to be a doyen of this new critical discourse, many historians argue that such discourses have a pre-Derridean origin.[9]

### The Subjective Turn:  Entering the Archive

The structure of this essay juxtaposes my archival experiences with such various academic discourses on the archive. My personal tryst began on a mellow February morning of 2005 that marked my first access to the Record Room of the National Archives, New Delhi. I was in my MPhil 1st semester and the maiden entry was nothing less than being allowed into the sanctum sanctorum of history where the 'past' lies embedded within sheaf of documents and microfilms waiting to be unearthed. On retrospect, such an outlook seems overtly positivist. Non-acquaintance to any archive before 2005 explains why I had displayed the routine positivism of a traditional historian and remained loyal to the Rankean idea of representing history as "it really was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) thus reiterating the '19th century fetishism of documents'[10] that was dominant in Western historical consciousness till the outbreak of WWI. A better part of the next six months went in trying to 'unlearn' the foundational principles of the Common-sense view of history/Scissors-and-Paste history, strengthened by the Empiricist tradition of Great Britain that had defended the notion that facts 'speak for themselves'. As days progressed and I searched for the 'right' file and 'most authentic' record on the *Mahari*/Devadasi of Jagannath Temple of Orissa, my understanding of the role of archive in history and the character of 'facts' came to be informed more profoundly by my subjective

experiences and issues raised and discussed in contemporary archival studies than the inherited positivist wisdom.

In my M. Phil. years, I had to consult primary records in archives of four cities namely Delhi, Kolkata, Bhubaneshwar and Puri, each 'produced' and maintained as much by its specific political and cultural settings and research protocols as by the discretion of the archivists. While the experience of working in each of them was characteristically different from the other, there were certain common junctures that created some familiar experiential patches.

## (a) New Delhi

Back in 2005/2006, the record room of the National Archive was a sprawling rectangular space where more than twenty researchers could simultaneously sit and work, surrounded by stacks of files in several racks lining the walls. Tags of every imaginable shape peered through the files as those waited patiently for their 'masters'—the scholars, to reclaim them each morning, dusting their backs and making them 'speak'. The room also had two microfilm readers carefully stationed beside rolls of microfilms of newspapers, journals and other documents of historical importance - meticulously preserved and catalogued. Though wider than a standard room, the record room was smaller than a hall, appearing more like an-in-between space. In its character too, the archival space lacked definiteness—a feature that resonated with what scholars especially young researchers felt about and around that place. Winter evenings were especially laced with feelings of disquiet as I often worked till the closing hours, rummaging through the catalogue to uncover something pertinent or frantically trying to complete a particular file in order to place the next requisition. I recall how the unrest would invariably persist till I could stop making notes, take the last 615 bus back to the campus just in time for dinner and call it a day. Steedman[11] would have perhaps interpreted my travails as a *historian's loneliness* that gets reinforced by an 'out-of-place' feeling though that can be contested as journeying by public vehicle for five days a week and staying alone in a campus in Delhi, I hardly felt like a stranger either in the capital city or around the impressive Janpath building. Nonetheless a feeling of alienation did mark my initial engagement with the archive and what perhaps triggered such placelessness was, to begin with, the layout of the room that resembled a school classroom. The archivist's desk stood at the head of the room facing scores of researchers[12]either ruminating over the dearth of required sources or opulence of the same, lack of time-in-hand or more often simply waiting for their files to arrive. Such positioning, from the Foucaldian

perspective, seemed unequal as far as sharing of power was concerned. Consequently, a researcher's engagement with his/her files, notes or thoughts was never impenetrable or an individual act. The solitude and privacy necessary for a researcher to navigate through the sources and make a temporal journey was denied thus making the act of engaging with the files tedious and often banal. It was as if, along with the space, the thoughts of the researchers and their terms of engagement with the pasts were also structured by the archivists, thus making the experience of working under such gaze, disturbing and distracting. While I distinctly remember his personality being benign and helpful, the phenomenon of being 'visible' and 'accessible' from 10am to 5pm each day *did* upset my concentration and thereby productivity. I recall how scholars took frequent breaks and often slipped into the adjacent room that was sunnier, perhaps to counter the almost oppressive silence of the record room. Barring the chatter and laughter of the archive staff and the sound of the ceiling fans that remained operational March onwards, practically nothing sliced through the almost deafening calm as scholars hardly exchanged notes amongst themselves or spoke to the archivist except while asking after their files. On hindsight it seems they were apprehensive of being reprimanded by the 'guardian' or simply wished to value time by concentrating solely on research work. The adjacent room housed the library where one could access first edition printed materials of historical value or collections of rare books. It had a different architecture and perceptibly dissimilar character. It was smaller, crammed with racks of books which though put on display were not freely available for a scholar to consult. The librarian-in-charge was however encouraging and eager to oblige the various requests of the scholars. The pitch, tone and texture of that room was so refreshingly different from the record room that I (like many other researchers) visited it daily even if to soak in the vibes. Significantly the record room was more lighted and spacious than the library, and should have ideally offered more latitude to a researcher to arrange his work or thoughts. In reality it ensured none. Later however I remember having devised my own techniques to dodge the gaze and work comparatively undisturbed. Apart from these two, there was a Reprographic section at the back of the main Records Room which I accessed, albeit infrequently, to have the necessary documents photocopied. Having no scholarship to sponsor my research in those initial months at NAI, I couldn't afford the luxury of ordering random photocopies. Also the interconnectedness of the files made it virtually impossible to selectively photocopy some in exclusion of others. While NAI was a space I engaged with during both my MPhil and Doctoral years, its presence was most conspicuous during the former when I regularly scouted for

Government Reports, Census, Gazette, Press clippings to narrativize the locus of the *Devadasis* within the contemporary socio-cultural and political matrix of the Jagannath Temple of Orissa. The Home and Ecclesiastical files proved helpful but my memory of consulting them is complex as I seemingly encountered an extremely layered reality. While on the one hand, they tended to be completely silent on the cult of *devadasi* or the rituals associated with it; on the other hand, I happened to identify files that collapsed 'information'/anecdotes on this particular section of womenwith those on prostitutes thus clearly hinting at a process of vilification and stigmatization in which both the colonial policy makers and the native bureaucrats were equal partners. Considering that both mythologically and in practice, *devadasis* of Orissa are recognized as one of the 36 *Karanas* or principal *sevayets* of the temple whose services are indispensable and non-substitutable to the Lord, such acts by the colonial policy makers or archivists reveal a deep bias and reek of constructionism thus giving leeway to the researcher to push the envelope and reinterpret the pasts.

## (b) Kolkata, Bhubaneswar & Puri

The singularity of the West Bengal State Archives(WBSA)or my experience of the same is primarily linked to its comparatively obscure location in a 'hidden' lane right beside the illustrious Presidency College, as also to the unassuming building that houses it.  Despite being conversant since my Presidency days with the photocopy shops lining the entrance of Bhabani Dutta Lane, I was unaware of the presence of an archive in the second floor of a non-descript building at the farthest end of the lane or the fact that it was the most significant repository of historical records of the Bengal Presidency between 18th and 20th century. I discovered it years later during my M.Phil. The archival building resembled a regular three-storied old building of North Kolkata that seemed a far cry from the distinctive demeanor of both the National Archives and the Odissa State Archives which I visited later in that year. Unlike the NAI in Lutyen's Delhi, brimming with exclusivity partly for its monumental structure but mostly due to its close vicinity to the Delhi Gate and the Parliament; the West Bengal State Archives is neither a building of national importance nor situated in a protected area bustling with bureaucratic and national importance and yet on first encounter it seemed more familiar and personal. As it resonated seamlessly with the composite milieu of College Street[13], my connection with WBSA seemed instantaneous and more assuring, at least to begin with. Consequently, the placelessness experienced in NAI (till I had managed to set up an individual work rhythm), did not feature in my

conversations with the WBSA as in the Bhabani Dutta Lane building, I was largely free of the archetypal historian's loneliness. On retrospect it was the particular personality and approach of the archivist in charge of WBSA in 2006 that actively eased my initiation into the archival space coupled with the fact that being in Calcutta I could commute from my home and not my room in Godavari Hostel. The archivist - a lady in her mid-forties who was also a scholar of history was sensitive to and appreciative of the queries and dilemmas of a researcher thus ably bridging over the solitude that otherwise was part of any researcher's archival experience. My working space consisted not of an individual desk and chair but a common wooden bench and table parked beside large old styled French windows looking over the back wall of Presidency College. As for days I worked from the same table with other scholars, an invisible bond was forged thus making the research atmosphere less rigorous or formal and much more relaxed. Even while waiting for files that never came or carried labels different from the ones originally requisitioned for, I seldom felt like a lone crusader as co-researchers often echoed my feelings and returned my thoughts. The attitude of the archivist further contributed in dispelling the aloofness of the place. With a detailed knowledge of the records, she was prompt with cues to assist. The persona of the archivist thus seemed to challenge and fracture the Foucauldian equation of Knowledge-Power since her role as a guardian didn't make her suppress or tweak the knowledge represented through the archival documents. Instead she appeared more as a protective guardian. What was starkly different from the National Archives or the Orissa Archives was the personal interest this archivist took in the research questions and sources requisitioned by each of the scholar—a trait that I again found embodied by the local archivist of the Jagannath Temple Research Centre run by the Jagannath Temple, Puri.

Both of them displayed a rare ability of remembering minute research details of the scholars at work and operated with a certain open mindedness that made the archival spaces non-prohibitive thus prompting creative ways of engaging with the primary source materials. The experience of working in the Orissa State Archives (OSA)in Bhubaneswar was qualitatively different from the Jagannath Temple Research Centre or the WBSA.  While the ambience was not forbidding, the archivist of the OSA could not be of much help since a greater part of the cataloguing was in Oriya and most of my co-researchers working there were local. It presented me with the classic dilemma of how to negotiate with the alien language since sources and the act of meaning-making are determined as much by their content

and historical contexts as by the language. Reading of an archive therefore begins with negotiating with the language[14] in which records are sourced and archived while archivists tend to follow the definition and terminology of the ICA (International Council of Archives). Though English was spoken and used in cataloguing the source files in the Odissa State Archive, the medium of instruction and exchange inside the archival setting was predominantly Oriya peppered with broken Hindi. Also on occasions when file tags were torn and replaced, the new tags were mostly written in Oriya thus making it difficult to decipher without assistance. At that stage I possessed a preliminary knowledge of Oriya and it was practically impossible for me to rely on my rudimentary reading skills. Significantly, my Oriya language skills were not called to test while working in the archive of the Jagannath Temple where cataloguing and naming of files were predominantly in English. Copies of old news items from Oriya newspapers were attached with suitable English translations thus making them legible for all and the prudent mind and care behind these was undeniably that of the archivist which made the issue of archival access smooth and non-complicated.

By contrast, in the OSA taking the archivist's help became an everyday ritual and seeking him out each time was arduous given his preoccupation with other scholars and routine administrative activities. The entire experience of relying on the archivist's knowledge to explore the past was frustrating and tiresome. In a sense, it was the ideal pretext for cultivating a sense of alienation. Culturally too, the ethos of OSA was unlike that at NAI or WBSA, a sense of regional-ness perhaps dominating the style and priorities of archiving in Bhubaneswar unlike in NAI or Kolkata.[15] Adding to the language woes, the OSA resembled more of a government office with a bureaucratic setting than an academic space thus demanding separate kinds of protocols and behavior rituals from the researchers who approached it with very different expectations and demands. The duality of the space informed my temperament and negotiation with its keepers each time I walked in or waited for my files to arrive.

### Recurrent Themes

Certain patterns, acts and dynamics repeated themselves during my four city archival journey that ranged from data searched and discovered, the power and persona of the archivists to the ethics of peering into past lives. While archival data worldwide is of two kinds - private and public, my archival experiences made me raise certain uncomfortable questions concerning the *efficacy of the privacy quotient* especially for sensitive

communities and also regarding the *technicalities distinguishing 'private' data from their 'public' counterparts*. Exploring the nature of private data involves engagement with the different facets of *Informed Consent* - either of the archivist or of the people who had created the data to be archived or more importantly of the person/community about which the data is about. Such engagement raises pertinent questions regarding the ethicality of handling sensitive records and such *ethical dilemma*remained part of all my archival experiences.

A researcher's ethical dilemma especially while interacting with an archive (as an abode of records or as records per se) generally revolves round two broad questions—(a) whom does an archivist protect by displaying or suppressing certain records and whom should the researcher aim to protect through his/her research and eventual narrativization and (b) whether it is right to access private memories, emotions of individuals, communities and nations. While exploring files on Devadasis or *Mahari*s of Orissa in NAI, WBSA, OSA or at Puri, I stumbled upon many sources that could effectively contribute to alternate historical narratives. Considering that my research questioned the historical identification of a *mahari* with prostitutes in a bid to resituate her within the discourse of Bhakti, I had to consciously choose those sources which would foreground the latter identity. I remember experiencing a persistent ethical dilemma over how to select and deselect the sources and rationalize against the dominant historical discourse on the devadasis. The zeal and responsibility to 'protect' the people about whom we are writing forms a key element of research ethics and this was a challenge I had to constantly rise up to during my MPhil archival days especially since the woman who was my key respondent and the community that formed the core of my research enquiry were historically maligned and misrepresented.

Apart from grappling with ethical dilemmas, issues of privacy of data etc., the question of access to records remain integral to any archival experience, such access being moderated and regulated by the archivist. Reflecting on the *role of an archivist* thus becomes indispensable and I recall how in the archives of Delhi, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar or Puri, this factor critically shaped my research productivity as well as my memory of and association with the spaces. Why is an archivist so fundamental to a researcher's experience? Why is he/she considered a 'guardian' of the space? Arguably since the past is never visible/accessible to the researcher as it 'happened' i.e. in a positivistic way, it seeps into the cognizance of the researcher as impressions/ montages principally through the intervention of the *archon*. Therefore, in an archival setting a researcher's first engagement is not

with raw, splintered pasts but with an ensemble of the past pre-selected by the *archon* whose lenses are also usually pre- determined by the socio-political backdrop of a particular archive. An archive thus acts as a double blind through which the researcher comes in contact with fragments of the past by interacting with the archon's mind and the politics of selection and de-selection before forming a historical discourse. What do the archivists guard? Is it some state secret which if revealed can disrupt the legitimizing tenor/discourse of the ruling dispensation? Or is it an alternate version of the past which if accessed and revealed will challenge the reigning historical narratives? Some scholars argue that archivists, especially a state archivist, is attuned primarily to 'controlling the revelation of the past' and not in revealing it authentically. Since my research focused on stigmatized women performers who did not occupy a central role in state discourses, the controlling dimensions of an archivist's role did not inform my archival experiences per se. Yet comments like 'eaten by red ants' or 'eaten by white ants' that often accompanied my returned requisitions and explained the non-availability of records did hint at the layered role of an archivist and more importantly the complex politics of the archive.

An abiding feature of my field experiences in all the four spaces was a concern for *research budget*. Scholars have written at length on how a constrained research budget affects their productivity along with compressed research time. While I was comparatively free to devote as much time as necessary to the archival visits both within and outside Delhi, my Supervisor being very categorical that a researcher needs to 'feel' the varied pasts embedded in the archive; the research budget continued to be a constant worry. Working in Bhubaneswar and then Puri appeared super-ordinately expensive vis-à-vis the Research Field allowance granted by the Centre for Historical Studies that refused to climb above Rs.65 a day even in 2006—an umbrella grant supposed to cover a researcher's daily accommodation, food, local transport, stationary, photocopy and print out costs! I remember waiting infront of CHS Office with knitted brows, wondering how to make that paltry sum expand and embrace every cost incurred during my archival visits to Bhubaneswar and Puri, identifying how much I needed to contribute through my own UGC fellowship. My worries were compounded by the rule that a researcher could avail of the departmental field trip allowance only once annually while my archival visits to the capital and coastal town of Orissa needed to be sequential, both for reasons of research continuity and cost-effectiveness. Fortunately, during those years my maternal aunt, an economist with NABARD,

happened to be posted in Bhubaneswar thus saving me the trouble of spending on accommodation.

While these patterns and motifs might be seen as impersonal, occurring across board to many more researchers, their chronological alignment is however subjective— the particular context of the research and location of the archive determining, to a large extent, their meaning and potency. Significantly these find meaning in and from the assumption of an archive as a static entity, and as a legitimate prop of production and emission of knowledge about pasts of a nation and her people. The following section decenters this assumption, aiming to look at the archive as a relational concept, the realization of which for me was as much notional as personal.

### *Problematizing the Archive*

What was the function of an archive within my experiential canvas? Did it merely help in identifying and collecting the source materials that could definitively shape my research questions and corroborate my research hypothesis? Or did it have a wider metaphoric significance vis-à-vis my interaction with pasts? Such questions are open-ended and seldom lead to linear answers since 'facts' or sources were never 'out there' and my task as a researcher was neither predetermined nor uniform. However the process almost always involved an element of interaction or what Maria Tamboukou in an incisive article[16] has termed as "*intra-action*". Tamboukou recounts her experiences of using the archive of Texas Austin to unearth the past life of a feminist writer and discusses how she relied on Barad's concept of 'intra-action' (which is again a spin-off of Niels Bohr's concepts in philosophy-physics) that emphatically foregrounds the relation between components than connections between formed entities having well-defined boundaries. She refers to Barad's core argument that it is through intra-actions that both human and non-human entities emerge and take shape thereby indicating that their forms are not pre-determined or pre-existing. Tamboukou applies this model of intra-action to a historian's research experience in the archive to explicate that "'the researcher', 'the letters in the archive' and the 'research strategies of narrative analysis' cannot be taken as separate and pre-existing entities that interact in the final stage of the research process'…"[17]. Elaborating upon the received wisdom she posits how such intra-actions are not limited to the ultimate stage. Instead they are decisive in forming continuous entanglements within a particular spatial and temporal matrix thus informing the shaping of all

the involved entities. Tamboukou makes yet another significant observation that in historical research, the archive, similar to a research apparatus in scientific researches, is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of narrative formation around a particular research theme and is not a 'given' as a static repository of tangible facts. Such conceptual model hinged on intra-action turns the table on prior notions of positivistic fixity.

Juxtaposing Tamboukou's observations with my own archival experiences which were hardly uniform, the theory of intra-action seems equally relevant. On retrospect my archival knowledge did not emerge from files or records per se but my relationship with and reading of the same, this intra-action being tempered with both wonderments at 'discovery' of significant fragments about the past and dejection at 'absence' of sources. Requisitions for files in NAI were often met with rejections carrying explanatory notes like 'reserved by Ministry', 'Confidential', 'and Missing' etc. Here it is pertinent to offer a brief peek into the kinds of sources I was exploring. My MPhil focused on reconstituting the identity of the *devadasi* community of Jagannath Temple of Puri within the framework of religion and I operated around my principal research hypothesis that a *Mahari/ Devadasi* of Puri cannot be equated with a prostitute of the colonial period and needs to be resituated and their identities reconfigured within the pantheon of religion which was *sanatan* Hinduism. Thus to 'rescue' and reify their identities lost within the trappings of 'Evil' in colonial India, there was need to re-evaluate the colonial understanding of evil which for a larger part of the 19th and early 20th century was synonymous with fallen women or prostitutes. This led me to look for Police, Judiciary and Public records classified under Home Files. Considering that these sources concerned a community—stigmatized and pariahnized in colonial documentation, their classification under 'confidential' category was unexpected and raised questions about the motive and intent of such cataloguing. It left me wondering without avail, about what triggered such classification—whether it was from a protective impulsive or from an instinct of suppressing sensitive data about women considered widely as public and fallible.

It was only around the third month of working in the NAI that I chanced upon an important source material. This wait for the 'right' sources is fundamental to a researcher's archival experience, built upon perseverance and fortitude—virtues essential to his/her craft and dialogue with history. The wait and the subsequent 'find' further made me realize that no researcher of history actually finds anything in an archive as a letter, a bill, a list of employees or an Assembly Debate are not historical per se. They

enter into the world of history only through a process of intra-action and meaning-making informed by the particular research template of a historian. It is this process of intra-action that thereby inserts meaning and temporal context to an otherwise mundane, ahistorical document, the research potential of which is not pre-fixed. Evidently it is through a process of intra-action between a researcher's quest and questions and the space, time and materiality of the archival experience that the quality and character of the research output can be properly determined. The non-fixity of my own archival experiences thus finds theoretical corroboration in Tamboukou's model based on Barad where the former finds parallel between a scientific research apparatus and an archive[18]. By this analogy it is the relationship of reciprocity formed between a researcher, an archive and the spatial and temporal matrix that surrounds them that works collaboratively in determining the research output. Thus much like the researcher/scholar, the archive might also be perceived as an important actor involved in rescuing and framing histories, its passivity and non-neutral nature remaining constant amidst the variedness of its spaces in the regional or national contexts.

### *Facts of the Past and Facts of History*

The non-fixity of an archive raises questions about the nature of documents it is supposed to protect, identified by historians as 'facts' though there is hardly any historical consensus on their specific nature. E. H. Carr, a British career diplomat and perhaps the most impactful exponent of the meaning and methodological content of history in the twentieth century, has discussed at length the perils of a historian in failing to recognize that all facts/events of the past *do not* and *should not* qualify as facts of history. He cites the example of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon River in 49 BCE[19] to suggest that it was a historian who had attributed a historic meaning to Caesar's action by connecting it to the wider narrative of Rome's fate and by default the fate of the Western Civilization. Therefore, it was none other than a historian who had rescued this event from the rubric of everyday events of the past, gleaned it and identified it as *history*.

Carr emphasizes on this process of historicization by establishing a dialogic relation between a historian and events of the past. The role of a historian is deeply underscored in the following extract.

> …the facts of history never come to us 'pure'…they
> do not and *cannot* (accent is mine)exist in a pure form:

> they are always refracted through the mind of a recorder.…when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it. (Carr 1964/1987:22)[20]

Viewed from a non-positivistic point of view facts do not appear to 'speak for themselves' nor does history 'happen' on its own or through divine dictates[21]. I argue that the praxis of this discipline or processes of selection, omission and inclusion of past events in a narrative need to be understood not only as a handiwork of the historian—as R.G. Collingwood would have us believe, but as an outcome of intra-action. Such intra-action, I argue, takes place between a historian and facts of the past against the backdrop of a particular space-time mosaic. Dvelving further into the inter-temporal intra-action patterns, I identify two distinct temporal motifs: a) the past time that seeps into the present through the narrativization of history and b) historian's own time with its singular socio-political dimensions that inadvertently shape his *mentalité* and predilection, impacting his choice of concepts or language. To make sense of histories through these dual temporal lenses, there is need to go beyond the empirical understanding of the subject and explore its inherent philosophy[22] that suffuses the historical processes with meanings stretching across times. Such philosophical perspective urges a historian to search for meanings beyond the archival representations, the latter largely documenting not the past per se but impressions of the same captured in contemporary thoughts, annals and varied entries. This holds true as much for the 'Private Papers' category of the archives as for *'Histories'* by Herodotus. As a process of meaning making, the researcher/historian is thus required to re-enact in his mind the thoughts /actions of the actor whose lives or actions are objects of historical study. For a researcher therefore, encountering truths of the past is usually through a process of double screening. Therefore, it can definitely be argued that a historian is twice removed from the 'actual' phenomenon and to arrive at the 'meaning', he is required to practice 'imaginative understanding'.

While sieving through the copious archival notes and arranging them into a cogent meaning-structure, I often exercised imaginative understanding, taking a peek into the minds and motives of colonial policy makers and even the *maharis*. Engagement with the mind of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy— the fiery medical practitioner and social activist of British India, known historically for her feisty campaign to pass the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act into a law in 1947, was especially rewarding. Such téte-

a-téte led to a string of questions. I was prompted to imagine whether it was her own maternal lineage— (her mother being a *Devadasi* and father a college principal) that made her unusually perceptive to the 'disease' perpetuating the custom of dedicating small girls to the temples as *devadasis* or God's servants. Or was it her self-affirmed role as a feminist that made her take such a radical stand against the continuance of the custom? The dissenting voices of the *devadasis* began making equal sense when I came across law suits filed by some of them in protestations[23] against this proposed Bill in the record room of the Indian Law Institute Library, New Delhi. I recall being faced with the onerous task of imagining the contradictory motives of the social activist and the *maharis* so as to arrive at some historical objectivity.

## *Conclusion*

Archives tested my erstwhile idea of history as also how to engage with it, leaving me with a lasting realization regarding a researcher's responsibilities as also his/her relation to the past. And I found myself returning time and again, to Walter Benjamin's observation that "it is not so much what the dead leave behind as it is what the living end up retrieving…" (Fritzsche 2005:15). Researchers or practitioners of history are thereby heirs to the past lives in all their material and immaterial dimensions and after-effects. Since the past inheres as much in material objects as in its non-material traces like memory, it is therefore the onus of a researcher to revive the latter. Such acts are essential to 'retrieve' not only that temporal scape that precedes a historian's own; they also redefine his ties with the discipline of history. I searched for it as much in archival files and records as in the long oral interviews with *Sasimoni Mahari*—memory emerging as the binding factor in both. It is thereby fitting to conclude that a researcher while engaging with memories of past lives in an archive and outside it, creates his/her own archive that is trans-temporal in the same way that he himself gets constituted through entangled intra-actions.

## *Notes*

1. Walter Benjamin's understanding of memory as an inheritance is significant, as within his theoretical universe, it becomes an inheritance only when the successors of the dead, cultivate such memory by historically situating it. "Benjamin proposes a cultural

interpretation of remembering in which traces are not simply left behind and recollection is not assumed, in which mental habits across time rather than physical things in the present bring the past into view, and in which specific heirs undertake the work of memorialization."(Benjamin 1969: 98)

2. "Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive." (Derrida 1996: 1)

3. Derrida, Jacques and Eric Prenowitz. 1995. 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression'. *Diacritics*. Vol. 25: 2.

4. The presence of a shelter house for documents and their guardians—besides raising questions of regulating the easy accessibility of the documents and thus fragments of past to researchers especially in difficult socio-political settings and thus of ethics, assumes a given and fixed, non-transferable identity of the artifacts of the past.

5. Derrida, Jacques and Eric Prenowitz. 1995.

6. Blouin Jr., Francis X. 2004. 'History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive'. *PMLA*, Vol. 119: 2.

7. "'The colonial archive' was the repository of prejudice against the 'native', who was only visible when he (usually he) was a problem: as insurgent, criminal or savage; and a malaise was diagnosed among historians (especially of South Asia) where they were deemed to be reproducing the assumptions of the archive and/or the authors of its documents" (Zachariah 2016: 13).

8. "I think that as historians learn to operate with a more ac-tive conception of an archive, 'the 'archive is revealed to be a rhetorical move rather than a place where documents are deposited…" (Ibid:14).

9. Ann Stoler categorically argues that the archival turn is pre-Derridean, the theoretically critical and politically charged role of the historian and the archive being talked about in works of Natalie Zemon Davis, Thomas Richard etc. (Stoler 2002: 92)

10. Often considered the father of modern Scientific History and an important representative of German idealistic philosophy (Gilbert 1987: 393), Ranke articulated his faith in the limited power of historians which is just to reveal the past as it was, and not to interpret it or assign meanings to it as per his own understandings of how people should have acted or incidents should have unfolded.

Bearing an indelible connect with 'facts' as they existed, Rankean idea of history was thus largely positivistic.

11. C. Steedman 2001.

12. The arrangement bore a striking similarity with that of a school classroom, sans the characteristic dais/podium common in a class room to officially elevate a teacher's position vis-à-vis the students. Relationally too, the skewed disbursal of power within that space between the archivist and the researchers resembled a school room setting than an independent research environment.

13. Culturally it is an immensely rich region of abiding international repute with historically significant Colleges, Universities, the World's largest market of second hand books and the Indian Coffee House situated within 200 mts. of each other.

14. "Language as carrier conveys concepts created over time by professional practice and theory and formed and biased by their surrounding administrative traditions and overall organizational and national culture and subcultures… concepts go with language just as wines go with dishes in France" (Albada 2007:215).

15. While Delhi was the capital of British India since 1911, Calcutta continued to be the cultural capital of pre-independence India even after the official transfer of capital. English remained the common language of parlance in both the places, more so in Calcutta, owing to the connect the Europeans had developed with the erstwhile capital. Orissa though a part of Bengal Presidency was still a land of feudal lords and kingships thus upholding the dominance of Oriya and resisting Anglicization. This socio-cultural difference was noticeable in the archival setting too.

16. Tamboukou, Maria. 2013. 'Archival research: unraveling space/time/matter entanglements and fragments'. *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 14: 5.

17. By "final stages of the research process" Tamboukou implies the publication of monographs or chapters based on the research.

18. "In drawing analogies between the apparatus in scientific research and the archive as an apparatus in narrative research, what I want to emphasize here is that the specific material, spatial and discursive conditions of my archival research…had a significant impact on the conduct and outcome of the research.  In the same way that 'apparatuses are not passive observing instruments', archives are

not neutral sites within which researchers 'objectively' read, take notes and accumulate data." (Tamboukou 2013)

19. Till date the metaphoric value of 'crossing of the rubicon' is immense as this event due to the historic changes that it ushered in, has come to symbolize a point of no return/a path that once taken cannot be retraced back and thus revolutionary.

20. Carr, E.H. 1964/1987. *What is History?* Penguin, England.

21. The cult around self-sufficiency of facts was largely founded on an assumption that it was through God's discretion and actions of a Superior Force that certain facts become enabled to speak for themselves. This view was subscribed to among others by Ranke and came to be dismissed only after the WWI. Post 1918, people of Western Europe could no longer repose faith in the earlier version of God ordained history which lay in crumbles. Appreciation of a historian's role and responsibility grew from the juncture.

22. This term was first invented by Voltaire and through Ranke, Dilthey and Croce, it has crossed many divergent and contradictory continents of meaning. Till date R. G. Collingwood, a British philosopher and archaeologist remains the finest exponent of the philosophy of history—a discourse he has debated and discussed in great detail in the classic *The Idea of History* (1946) which was published posthumously.

23. The counter-argument of the *Devadasis* against the proposed Bill was that delegitimizing it would perpetually label it as an 'Evil' and thus reproduce the colonial understanding.

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