

Report on the

One Day Workshop

on

The Living Archive

organised by

Calcutta Research Group

In collaboration with

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung-South Asia

Kolkata 21 December, 2021

Concept Note

Introduction

The practice of building an archive requires creative thinking about an institution's research agenda. Therefore, in fulfilling the core research agenda, archivists try to document the incidents and actors of a particular period to help themselves and future researchers. A living archive refers to a growing and evolving repository of the events of the socio-economic and political environments which connect an institution to the realities with which it is working or intends to work, negotiating with the inclusions and exclusions that traditional archives are formed on. It could be a collection of news clippings, videos, interviews, photographs, posters, pamphlets, leaflets, booklets, weblinks, etc. from different platforms that represent a specific theme of interest to the institution, scientifically catalogued and digitised for ease of access.

Documenting the migrants, especially the migrant workers and the public health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic is the focus area of the present archive. Calcutta Research Group (CRG) became interested in building this archive after witnessing the suffering migrant labourers during the pandemic induced ensuing lockdown. The living archive on CRG's website presently contains news clippings, YouTube videos, Facebook links, podcasts, short documentaries and blogs on the crisis inflicted on migrant labourers by the pandemic. The archive, on one hand, tries to document the life of the migrants and their struggle during the pandemic, the migrant worker as the resilient subject of migration. On the other hand, it documents the various kinds of precarity that the migrants face.

CRG aims to take this initiative forward and collect more resources on the theme of migration and forced displacement, made available in a digital format on its website. The present archive also has had an analytical report based on the existing resources.

The Workshop

To develop and move forward with the concept of a living archive, Calcutta Research Group will organise a day-long workshop with scholars, archivists, library professionals, journalists and civil rights activists regarding designing and preparing a database on migration and labour problems, peace and conflict, refugees and their identity questions, reflections of contemporary issues in law, literature and society. The discussion will be divided into two parts along with a keynote lecture on the necessity of living archives in migration studies.

Programme Schedule

9.30 am-10.00 am: **Tea and Registration**

10.00-11.00: **Inaugural Session**

Chair: Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Rabindra Bharati University, India & CRG.

Welcome address by Byasdeb Dasgupta, University of Kalyani, India & CRG.

Introducing CRG's Living Archive, Ranabir Samaddar, CRG & Samata Biswas, The Sanskrit College and University, India & CRG

A brief presentation on CRG's living archive by Binayak Mallick, CRG

11.00 am-11.30 am: **Tea**

11.30am – 1.00 pm: **Session I**

Archiving the labour: A panel of scholars, activists and journalists and researchers will discuss the necessity to document the struggle of migrants and migrant labourers during the crisis.

Chair: Arup K Sen, Serampore College, India & CRG

Panellists:

Ronak Chhabra, NewsClick, India.

V Ramaswamy, Scholar and Activist, India & CRG.

Subhasri Ghosh, Asutosh College, India.

1.00 pm-2.00 pm: **Lunch**

2.00 pm -3.30 pm: **Session II**

New forms of archives: This session will discuss the new forms of archives (i.e. multimedia archives, digital archives etc.) that emerged in the last few years and talk about the process and technicalities to prepare these archives.

Chair: Arun K. Chakraborty, Bose Institute, India

Panellists:

Moinak Biswas, Jadavpur University, India

Anwasha Sengupta and Supurna Banerjee, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, India

Shantanu Majee, Techno India University, India

3.30 pm – 4.00 pm: **Tea**

4.00 pm – 5.30 pm: **Session: III**

Challenges of Archiving the Labour and the Migrants (Virtual): Documenting the migrants especially the labours is always a challenging task. There are only a few archives and individuals who take the challenge to document the labours especially during the time of worldwide crisis (war, racial conflict, epidemic etc.). The experts in this session will discuss the challenges and how they fought with those challenges.

Chair: Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, Asiatic Society Kolkata, India & CRG

Panellists:

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay, Indian Institute of Scientific Education and Research, India

Nargis Canafe, University of York, Canada

Anant Maringanti, Hyderabad Urban Lab, India

5.30 pm-6.00 pm: Closing Remarks by Shyamalendu Majumdar, Sivanath Sastri College, India & CRG and Samata Biswas, CRG

Vote of Thanks by Binayak Mallick, CRG.

Inaugural Session

The session began with the remarks by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, Honorary Director of the institute. He talked about the basic differences between the archives and the living archives. The dynamic nature of the living archives. Byasdeb Dasgupta, President of the institute welcomed the guests and the participants of the workshop. He also said that the concept of archive is a little bit different from what we called archive. The contemporariness of the resources on a particular subject is kept here to preserve any particular incidents of a time. He said that this workshop would benefit future researchers in social sciences.



Pic1: Inaugural Session: Living Archive Workshop

Ranabir Samaddar said the debate between the conventional archive and the living archives at CRG. The initiative started to archive the contemporary crisis that arose during the pandemic. The archive began with collecting links of different news items published in the newspaper along with a few audio and video clippings, posts on social media to document some news items. An index has already been prepared. He said that creating a living archive had created a contradictory awareness of archiving the contemporary. A crucial role had been played by the collector who chose the material to be collected and put in a repository. Without the passion for collecting material, the archive means nothing. He said that every archive has been built with the passion of collecting details about the living labour who faced enormous challenges during the first phase of the pandemic. An awareness of the location of the reports and news items may be one of the necessary elements of the archive. The challenge for this archive was to represent the present history of labour migration during the pandemic. This contradiction should be there to document and collect the necessary resources. Giving examples about the collection of handwritten manuscripts, Samaddar referred to Mohd. Sahidullah's name who collected and documented the handwritten manuscripts. The collectors' skills and knowledge were necessary for this process. The same skill is necessary

for collecting resources on living labour. He gave the example of the research on the railway strike of 1974 which reflects the presentist standpoint of the study of a historical strike. That kind of contradiction is necessary to build the living archive and CRG started to take the challenge. But the dissemination of information is poor and therefore most of the people who work in the field would not have any idea about the archive. This problem should be solved by those who managed the archive. Samaddar also said that there should be a point where the living archive should stop at some point and CRG can continue till 2022.

Samata Biswas said that an archive should not only focus on what an organization has, rather it should also focus on what it had not. It would be helpful for all the researchers and the people who took the initiative to build the archives to have to sit for some time and plan for the development of the archive. The CRG living archive has some potential to be a useful resource for future researchers.

The session ended with Binayak Mallick's brief presentation on CRG's living archive. He had been advised to develop the index further.

Session I

Archiving the Labour

Ronak Chhabra elaborated on his work 'COVID-19 and After: Work, Life & Saliency of Primitive Accumulation,' published by CRG in November 2021 (*Policies & Practices*, no. 122). He spoke of how this essay attempted to contextualize CRG's living archive on the effect of the pandemic on migrant labourers. The deprivation induced by the pandemic, in his opinion, must be witnessed as a continuation of the 'structural crisis' that seized India's economy at the beginning of the previous decade. He emphasised the need for solidarity groups and an alternative politics which, with the participation of migrant labourers, will redefine 'work' and 'life.'



Session 1: Archiving the Labour



V Ramaswamy and Ronak Chhabra

V. Ramaswamy spoke of his effort in the 1970s to create an archive on the construction of the Kolkata Metro. That archive, which documented the experiences of the labourers who built the metro as well as those individuals who were evicted to make space for the project, has preserved news clippings and the record of several public interest litigations from the period. In narrating stories of poor housing and bonded labour, the archive reveals the contested nature of infrastructural development, especially in large cities.

Subhasri Ghosh spoke of her involvement with a digital archive titled *1947 Partition Archive*. This archive speaks of 'the witnesses of 1947,' and contains interviews with both well-known and ordinary individuals whose lives were deeply affected by the partition of the sub-continent. The pandemic had initially challenged the progress of the archive, as oral interviews became difficult. However, the commencement of a virtual talk series has bestowed the advantage that the archive can now involve people across borders and continents.

Session-II

New forms of Archive

The panel discussion on 'New Forms of Archive' briefed on the discursive turn that contemporary archiving leaving behind its colonial garb of collecting and preserving as a referential point of analysis for utopian liberalism of the West and has rather looked into the nuances of epistemologies of development of a particular focus either as a tradition that needs to be preserved from the verge of extinction or as to trace the colloquial growth of an ever-evolving rhizomatic infrastructural spurt, The Salt Lake Archives by IDSK, Kolkata, is an attempt to document the city's growth through the East Kolkata Wetlands, and is indeed the unique example of modernist turn in urban growth in post-colonial India and gives a fir idea of transformation of Wastelands into prospering urban sprawl or rather the push of the urban growth towards the Salt Lakes. The Media Lab Project from the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University funded by the Tata Trust, Mumbai is the first successful initiative of open access repository preserving digital art forms like photography, documentaries. The Media lab can be considered as the classic example of the rising global trend in digital humanities. 'Expressions' of life forms preserved digitally hold the core essence of this initiative. Shantanu Majee detailed the development of the forthcoming Archive of the North Indian Classical Music Jadavpur University. An archive that tries to link sound studies to the political economy of music considering the new domains of the sonic world we live in with digital revolution where the power to record has now been plebeianized as contrary to the colonial sound recording system or the initial years who is recorded in itself becomes a hierarchised selective work and elitising the activity of sound recording reaching the masses. These different forms of archiving open up newer domains of experimenting with the alternate experiential zones of documenting not only the past but also the continuing present not as moments in the civilization of man but an eventual process that remains in the flux of bio-social death but the existence that demands preservation.



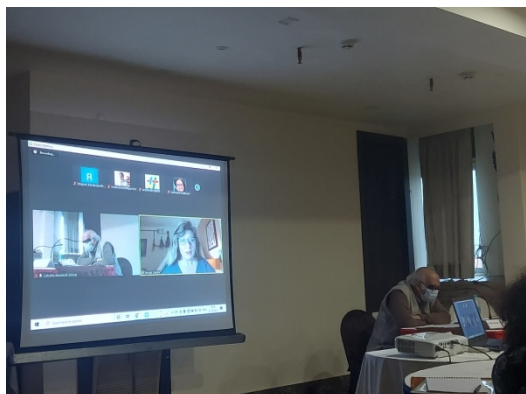
Session 2: New Forms of Archives

Session III

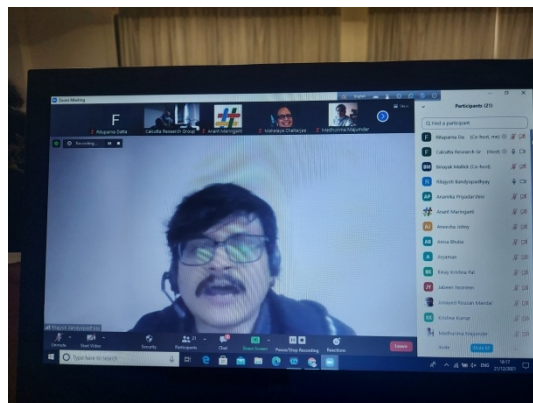
Challenges of Archiving the Labour and the Migrants

Documenting the migrants, especially the labourers is always a challenging task. There are only a few archives and individuals who take the challenge to document the labourers especially during the time of worldwide crisis (war, racial conflict, epidemic etc.). With this note the virtual session was opened by the Chairperson for the session Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty for discussion on the challenges of archiving migrants and how they fight the challenges.

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay's, presentation looked into the possibilities of engaging urban experiences through data transformation and the various ways in which new forms of collective experiences become data. The discussion detailed the trend of software applications becoming almost ubiquitous in today's time and taking control over daily human activities and management of real estate. The presentation looked into the facets of connectivity of electronic devices over network through the application of software. The ways in which digitised data reinvents corporate space were highlighted by the talk; how the transmission of data in different situations, synchronises the gaps between production and distribution and culminates into data syndromes – often reflected in the frontiers of colonial cities in the postcolonial world.



Session 3: Challenges of Archiving the Labour and the Migrants



Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay

Nergis Canefe began her presentation by emphasising the vitality of the responsibility of witnessing and documenting the occurrence of an event or phenomenon, as well as dissemination of the results of the research analysis and the research findings with the witnesses acting as the source of the information. The discussion stressed that it should be the ethical responsibility of the institution conducting the research to be accountable to the subjects of scholarly research. Assuring and keeping safe the witnesses under study from mass vulnerability such as dispossession and displacement are important issues that require delicate handling to keep away societal suffering.

Anant Maringanti's presentation opened with the broad differentiation between documentation and archiving. Documentation is the generation of data and insights from a collection or reservoir of documents or materials. Archiving is the process that helps in generating information and its use, from documented materials available in the form of text, image, sound, narratives. Interviews covering the long oral history of the plight of workers along with photographic documentation enabled the understanding of the attributes of specific locations and neighbourhoods characterised by the abandonment of workers by their employers or contractors, especially workers who had migrated from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand. Labelling of data and creation of metadata and setting up archives for the use of future generations become resourceful. It should be important to question why certain places witnessed migrants going into hiding and facing problems.

The session concluded with the assertion that in archiving time-duration plays a significant role and with it come to the difficulties of locating the events in terms of names of places and time. Documentation is a continuous process that requires segmentation of the archive into varied sections based on time and themes.

Concluding Session

The session concluded with the closing remarks and a summary of the discussion by Shyamalendu Majumdar and Samata Biswas. They advised the researchers to take some lessons from the discussion and make the workshop more useful. Samata Biswas summarized the entire discussion and highlighted the basic points. She said that the librarian and the committee should prepare an index and take the necessary steps to preserve the news items, videos and podcasts while it has not been on the web. Efforts should be made to collect pamphlets, leaflets and other resources which enriched the archive of the institute and the future researchers.

The workshop ended with a vote of thanks by Binayak Mallick.