Report: Online Archives Days 2021 – Day 1

Report by Abirami Chandrakumar
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The meeting started with a moment of silence for all those whose lives have been destroyed and lost during the atrocities of the civil war and the continuing structural genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO) – Norway branch gave Zoom technical support for the two days event. Sambavi Vethananthan from TYO Norway narrated the event on 12th June 2021.

DsporA Tamil Archive: welcome speech

Baheerathy Kumarendiran behalf of DsporA Tamil Archive made a welcome to all those participating and a big thank you to those who have made this event possible.

Due to the collective efforts of the social actors, the history and culture of Tamils spread around the globe are preserved.

DsporA Tamil Archive was created in 2020 as an effort in the journey of search for the history of the migrated Tamils in Norway. Its primary aim is to spread awareness of archiving and accessibility of archives to the Tamil diaspora. The preservation of our past and identity through archiving is no new phenomenon for Tamil society. However, war, conflict and genocide have presented a need to revive and strengthen this practise among us.

We attempted to meet with the archiving efforts in Eelam but due to the social and political situation back home, this was not possible. Their documentation activity in the homeland is essential to the existence of Tamils.

On this occasion, where we commemorate the 40th anniversary of the burning of the Jaffna library. We would like to make a humble appeal to all Tamil organisations. We request you to appoint a records manager in your organisation to revive the documentation and archiving tradition of Tamil.

Nalayini Indran: Role of archive

Information about archiving is not a subject which is generally known, and therefore I don´t expect most people to have a thorough knowledge of it. Also, the practice of archiving varies from country to country.

Important words to know the meaning of in relation to this topic are records, documents, archive, documentation.

The language we use to talk about the subject has evolved through time. It is important to differentiate between ஆவணப்படுத்தல் (documentation) and ஆவணக்காப்பகப்படுத்தல் (archive).

ஆவணப்படுத்தல் – documentation: An information of an activity recorded on a medium as documentation (process documentation to create product documentation).

ஆவணக்காப்பகப்படுத்தல் – archive: A documentation (product) that is appraised for long-term preservation and thus transferred to an archive (institution).

It is also important to have an idea of the lifecycle of how and why a record is archived.

Archived sources can help us to understand the past and evolution of cultures. They can also aid future political or social decisions.

For the diaspora Tamils who have faced oppression, a need will emerge to have access to sources about the ethnic conflict and their identity and culture.

In Sri Lanka, archives from the 1600s are still intact. Documents from before were destroyed due to colonial rule. Using the archived documents which are available, we can understand how decisions were made and how conflicts were started and concluded.

It is important to safeguard the documents about how the Tamil culture and demographics changed because of the conflict. Only by using these, can we understand the state our society will be at in the future.

N. Selvarajah: Role of library

In our Tamil society, there is difficulty differentiating archives, libraries and museums.

In libraries, we make published works available for the general public so that they can read and get informed privately, as they were intended to be.

In museums, historical artefacts and sources are displayed for the public so that they can contribute to an understanding of society during the time of creation.

Archives is a place where we can find documents in all kinds of a medium that are preserved for long-term. But, in Sri Lanka, archives don´t have easy public access. But it is a means to store original sources and documents for professional research and general preservation.

The reasons behind the difficulty to differentiate these institutions are several. One is for example when it comes to libraries in Ilangai (Sri Lanka), we have state, public, special, school, university and many more libraries. The term library is perceived as comprehensive and is therefore also a means of archiving. A library does not only contain books but videos, audio and pictures. It is therefore natural to assume that the collection of media in libraries is the same as archive.

Our earliest proof of a library is an effort made by colonizers in the late 1800s. It was during the colonial period that such government institutions were founded in the country.

After the country became independent, the ethnic conflicts started, and thus the archiving of Tamil documents was no longer assured.

In Sri Lanka, however, a law called The Legal Deposit Law which states that 5 copies of every published book must be sent to The Department of Archive. These five copies will then be dispersed amongst the public libraries. Due to this law, archives and libraries go hand in hand in Sri Lanka. Sadly, publishers do not practice this law to avoid taxation, and so important preservation is left undone. There are also no Tamils in positions of power in the Department of Archive.

We put the entire blame on the government when it comes to the erasure of Tamil culture and history, but we must also partially take the blame ourselves. Very few of us care about whether Tamil books are being archived.

I'd like to show you my book Noolthettam (நூல் தேட்டம்), which is a list of global Eelam Tamil publications. This is a job I have taken upon myself but is in fact the duty of The National Library of Sri Lanka. In their list of publications, only government-issued Tamil books are included. When archiving there should be no filtration, and everything should be included. We have no idea what could be relevant for the future.

Our need now going forward to catalogue and organize all the lists and documents we have. We must work together internationally to do this, not by gathering all our documents in one place, but by having a digital list of the location of all such documents.

M.G. Sirikanthan: Role of Museums

My background is in technology and not museums, but I am working on establishing a Tamil Museum in London. Right now, we are creating this as a virtual experience but are aiming for a physical final museum.

From the definition of museums by ICOM (International Council of Museums), we can have a sense of the roles of a museum. They are spaces for critical conversations, acknowledgement of challenges, safeguarding of artefacts and memories. They must be open and transparent to all and not run for profit. The collection of content for the museum should be in partnership and agreement with communities. Museums should have the purpose of contributing to the wellbeing of the inhabitants of the earth and the planet itself.

I believe that early Tamils used the human mind as an archive. This is because important events, cultural phenomenon and such were immortalized in verses and songs that were, perhaps intentionally, easy to memories. These were passed on from generation to generation and in the meanwhile stored in the mind.

I can also speculate that visual art forms such as traditional drawings, Bharatanatyam and theatre also were a way to pass on stories. Also, discussions at sangams (forums) were a way to keep something fresh in the public memory.

Due to the information in these formats being quite simple and concise, it was easy to remember, and therefore more probable to be passed down. However, during the 1500-year long period of Sanskrit rule, Tamil documentation was destroyed. Sadly, this has made it difficult to have a grasp on our cultural history.

Archives and libraries are interconnected because, at least in Britain, if desirable, one can attain access to archived material by contacting a library. In the same way, museums also have archives, parts that are not readily accessible to the public. The difference would be that libraries are a place where one can use sources to do in-depth research, while in a museum, the same concepts are simplified and visualized.

Our mission is to have a place in London where the entirety of important information on Tamils is presented. This will be digitally accessible to people regardless of where they are from. We are hoping for seven floors where each of them will be an extensive exhibition on a subject.

Nitharsan: Access to Tamil archives for knowledge and rights

My perspective is as a second-generation Tamil living in Switzerland. I am part of the media division in the political organisation, Phoenix The Next Generation, which was founded after the political void of 2009.

From the beginning, we had the desire to learn from the past to prepare for the future. We wished to answer questions such as, why did we start fighting and why is it important for us to continue the struggle?

Right now, the situation is not a conflict with weapons, but we must still use the same knowledge to win the battles that are thrown our way. By learning how previous generations strategized and faced challenges, we can be more prepared. This also strengthens our bond with our ancestors and motivates us.

Narratives are enriching to experience as they show us the different experiences people have in the same world. Experiencing an event through someone who was there, is the most valuable type of learning. By using the first-person sources from the conflict, we were able to showcase the scale of the conflict to international community and gather aid. These sources are also proof of what happened and a strong defence against deniers of the atrocities.

There is an ongoing battle of narratives surrounding the conflict in Sri Lanka. Many are attempting to twist what is considered the truth. We have three main firsthand written statements from the past which urge the termination of land grabbing from Tamils. This shows us how the oppression of Tamils is not due to a single political figure or party but is rather a systematic issue over several decades.

We released the book, "structures of Tamil Eelam: A Handbook", in 2019. Prior to this, attempts to create and organize the same information on social media was taken down. This book is a counter-narrative to the current widespread narrative of victimized perspective. It portrayed the de-facto state of Tamil Eelam, where Tamils governed themselves. This made us create another counter-narrative to the transitional justice after Mullivaikal 2009. We asked ourselves the question of why we needed to ask for justice in the oppressive Sri Lankan system when we already could retire to our thriving own system ourselves. In 2020 we released «Rise of the Tigers» which described the history of the LTTE. This book talks about their creation, motivations, politics and challenges.

We faced a few challenges in this processing, one being that Tamil sources are not systematized in any way. Many sources have been destroyed in the war, spread around the world with refugees or isolated by individuals. Due to this, over 90% of the information we attained, was from open source on the internet, and only about 10% was from first-hand sources.

I am therefore grateful for all of you present who have realized the importance of public access and systematising sources. Digitalization, as I am sure you agree, is the step forward. It is hard to destroy completely, easy to share and will become public property.

I also urge our community to not only archive sources to preserve them but also be able to do research on them.

Question time:

Baheerathy to Nalayini: Could you tell us about the relevance of administrative records for our community?

Local institutions in Sri Lanka have records of everything related to demographics, but few think to access these. I visited, for example, the Vavuniya records room (katcheri) and saw that it was in an appalling state. It is vital to archive these abundant records for the future before we go searching for other sources.

Baheerathy to Nalayini: In Tamil society, books are respected as sources, but could you tell us about other relevant sources?

When talking about the planning documents of a book, for example, these are important to understand the motivation behind the published work, and the perspective of the author. The means by which they acquired the information, could be useful to know.

Regarding other types of sources, such as records, maps, audio, films, archives exist for these too, as they are of importance.

N. Selvarajah:

I would like to add to the importance of administrative records by saying that, as mentioned here, we need people in the position of administrative records manager, a position which is nowhere to be found in Ilanakai (Sri Lanka). What I have seen, is an attempt at archiving in personal

homes. Sources that can't be found in national archives and libraries are stored vicariously in personal homes. These aren't taken care of by professionals and are deemed to be lost or damaged.

Archiving would at least give us a knowledge of where different sources are to be found.

Even if these sources are published on the internet, they wouldn't be as useful as they would have been in an archive. It is difficult to assess the trustworthiness of online sources, and the vast internet can be just as hard to navigate as the vast world. Another problem with digital sources is the risk of deletion. Hence, in my opinion, published books, are the best way to preserve sources.

During the armed conflict, there wasn't a focus on archiving, despite the 200 books that were published during the time. Another problem was that several of these publications were under 25 pages long and therefore categorized as pamphlets and not books. Several important publications about Tamils are in this format and now can only be found at the Tamil Sangam in Colombo.

Due to all these unforeseen problems, archiving is not just black and white. We are also not aware of harmful rules. An example is a rule in Sri Lanka that library books that are not checked out for more than two years are destroyed and not sent to archives. I wish for nothing to be filtered away or discarded.

Pathmanabhan Iyer chairperson at Noolaham Foundation:

We don't discard any sources we attain, and as Selvarajah said, don't filter away or disregard anything. Also, it is also important to document Tamil stories, outside of Sri Lanka. For example, here in London, there are catalogues of Tamil owned businesses and teachers in our art forms. The way I see it, a trivial thing like a phone book, can be a vital source in the future, therefore nothing is discarded.

Nalayini:

I also want to shoot in that in addition to published books, we must search for the unpublished materials and primary resources, in our archiving attempt.

DsporA Tamil Archive: Thank you

Thank you for sharing the stories of setbacks you yourselves have faced, and those you have learned about through sources on Tamils in Eelam (Sri Lanka). We who have established ourselves in foreign countries, do not face the same struggles as we would have back home. I hope that we use the advantages we have now to renew archiving in the Tamil community.

Once again we humbly request all Tamil organisations to appoint a records manager in your organisation.

Today's event concluded with an acknowledgement of thanks to the resource people who gave a speech, the Norwegian branch of the Tamil Youth Organisation, those who enriched the event

with other resources, and all those who joined us and raised many good ideas and questions. We hope to see you tomorrow.

Visit DsporA Tamil Archive YouTube channel for videos from the Archives Days 2021.