



## Tracing India in German Archives: Entangled Pasts in the Age of Digital Humanities

ANANDITA BAJPAI, THERESA SUSKI, JOHANNES HEYMANN

[Anandita.Bajpai@zmo.de](mailto:Anandita.Bajpai@zmo.de)

[jvpheyman@gmail.com](mailto:jvpheyman@gmail.com)

[theresasuski@googlemail.com](mailto:theresasuski@googlemail.com)

### **1. Modern India in German Archives**

Our engagement with the theoretical and methodological concerns raised in this article result from participating in the process of creating a database for the research project titled 'Modern India in German Archives, 1706-1989'.<sup>1</sup> This has entailed rigorous archival work in the city of Berlin in search of traces of India, more precisely, for sources relevant for modern Indian history and the history of Indo-German entanglements.<sup>2</sup> One of the objectives of such an endeavour is to emphasise the richness and potential of India-related holdings of German archives, which have hitherto not received an exhaustive and systematic attention, due to an excessive fixation with the colonial archives. The sources housed by German archives can offer new research perspectives for historians of South Asia as well as contribute in developing innovative transnational historical comparisons. The database is aimed at providing users with relevant information about the holdings and files that relate to India in Germany's myriad archives. A discussion on the nuances of the database, however, first necessitates an introduction to a larger debate.

### **2. Digital Humanities and the virtual archive**

#### *2.1 Insights and issues of the digital age*

Debates within Digital Humanities have opened new questions that confront both processes of acquiring and storing information as well as



the production of knowledge through academic texts. These debates rightfully point to the advantages and disadvantages of 'information in excess' and open access. The World Wide Web in general and search engines like Google in particular, which were unthinkable platforms for accessing information some decades ago but become inevitable today, offer the possibility of acquiring information in abundance. These platforms challenge the traditional authority of the archives as repositories of state and national institutional memory. Here information does not only refer to knowledge produced within the academy, to 'texts' and their limited university-centred audiences, but to a plethora of channels that make semi- and un-published works available and open to access and debate. Rosenzweig aptly points out: "The digital era has not only unsettled questions of ownership and preservation for traditional copyrighted material, it has also introduced a new, vast category of what could be called semi-published works, which lack a clear preservation path" (2003: 744).

In this regard the disadvantages accompanying information availability on the World Wide Web that also bear enormous consequences for projects of digitisation and open access are two-fold: first, the uncontrollability of the flow of information and problems related to 'evidence' and second, the relative lack of techniques of preservation within the digital world which re-define what can and cannot be accessible as sources for academic practice in the future. By referring to the uncontrollability of data availability we do not necessarily intend to argue in favour of means of filtering information access. This would defeat the very purpose of the emergence of numerous platforms, for e.g. initiatives by collectives to mobilise for political causes through new social media where it might not be possible to mobilise support through protests on the streets or awareness campaigns etc. By uncontrollability we understand the heterogeneous nature of the information that becomes available to users by the click of a finger.

This easy access raises valid questions on the abundance of data now available and the information overload that accompanies it. As Rosenzweig states: "The Internet has dramatically expanded and, hence, blurred our audiences" (ibid.: 739). This means not just the blurring of those who consume information, but also the expansion of those who produce it. This directly relates to the problem of what may and may not be regarded as proof or evidence for claims that are made for all kinds of endeavours, whether or not they are academic in their orientation. The traditional authority of the archives as repositories of 'historical truths' is challenged by an influx of inform-



ation that often struggles with its own credibility or the "fragility of evidence in the digital era" as it is often described (ibid.: 736).

The second problem relates to a more traditional issue that has haunted archivists in a plethora of ways for numerous decades—the question of preserving information. Whereas 'acid-paper', microfiches, microfilms, regular renewals of catalogues, and renewal of finding aids like inventories or registers have been part of the solution of the problem for archivists, Digital Humanities struggles with questions of long-term preservation of information on the internet, the durability of DOIs, permanent links, the longevity of information stored in online databases and so on, as well as the undeveloped storage capacity of data still to come.

Within academic circles, large metadata search platforms like JSTOR, Research Gate, Taylor and Francis Online, OPAC, Google, Google Books, Google Scholar or the 'Look Inside' feature of Amazon have become commonplace. These provide the unavoidable backdrop to the questions we pose in this article. Our main concerns are the following: What are the implications of the developments within Digital Humanities on how a search and research on specific topics is conducted within the physical brick-and-mortar space of the archive?<sup>3</sup> What are the consequences for future projects seeking to produce new databases related to the same topics? How and what can we learn from the current digitisation trends to use this possibility to its best? Our illustrative focus is on the archival landscape of the city of Berlin, which houses numerous German archives, both at the state as well as the federal state levels.

## *2.2 The Digital Turn and what it does to history as a discipline*

As pointed out by Lara Putnam:

The transnational turn is accelerating simultaneously with the digital turn, and it is no coincidence. Source digitisation has transformed historians' practice in ways that facilitate border-crossing research in particular. Web-based full-text search decouples data from place. In doing so, it dissolves the structural constraints that kept history bound to political-territorial units long after the intellectual liabilities of that bond were well known. Digital search has become the unacknowledged handmaiden of transnational history. (2016: 377)

Digital search, through portals like those mentioned above, has indeed brought to the notice of historians, connections and entanglements



that would be unimaginable or unheard of earlier. How do such portals achieve this daunting task? This largely can be traced in two important developments, as pointed out by Putnam. The first relates to easy access to secondary literature through initiatives enabling large meta-data searches (like JSTOR) since the beginning of the 1990s. The second relates to the increasing access in the World Wide Web to primary sources through a variety of databases since the beginning of the mid-2000s. This incorporates the added advantage of Optical Character Recognition (OCR), software that has made it possible to surf through the granular content of both primary and secondary sources via full-text searches (Putnam 2016: 379).

Such full-text word searches have indeed produced a boom in digitisation projects that help researchers find quicker and easier. OCR has thus made it feasible to do simple keyword finding in enormous databases that have become the repositories of millions of sentences. This has implied that a word search, which in the relatively narrow horizon of the scholar's world would lead to results that do not go far beyond the ambit of that world, can now hint at connections that the scholar would not preconceive. This broadening of the virtual archival landscape has been, and continues to be, an immense trigger sometimes for newer topics and on others for research on old transnational entanglements through a newer lens.

Most historians today are part of this Digital Turn and also its active co-shapers, though there is a scarcity of reflexive writing on the topic. The Digital Turn here should not be limited to Big Data<sup>4</sup> alone i.e. mapping, collecting, counting or ordering practices which are often subsumed under the umbrella title of 'digital methods' within the social sciences and the humanities. It also incorporates the broad spectrum of practices that historians indulge in on an everyday basis ranging from a simple search on Research Gate to writing micro-transnational histories based on such a search. Putnam rightfully concludes: "Precisely because web-enabled digital search simply accelerated the kinds of information-gathering that historians were already doing, its integration into our practice has felt smooth rather than revolutionary" (ibid.: 379). There is a relative scarcity, however, of reflection on the consequences of these transformations in terms of how research is conducted in general, barring the few exceptions of scholars in the fields of Digital Humanities, rhetoric and archivists.<sup>5</sup> Below we summarise some of the feared disadvantages and aspired advantages of these processes.



### 2.2.1 *Digital Humanities: disadvantages*

Coupled with the opportunity of availing sources in abundance comes the distancing the researcher faces vis-à-vis the geographical places of enquiry. Putnam categorises this as 'disintermediated discovery', stating that "[f]or the first time historians can find without knowing where to look" (ibid.: 377). This lack of physical proximity, that conventional analogue searching in archives imposed on researchers, also means that the geographical distance to the 'place' where the study is based is sometimes inversely proportional to the contextual knowledge on the results achieved from digital searching. In other words, the possibility that history students and faculty, often unwillingly, availed from was the process of being in the archive, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding that did not necessarily occur within the walls of the archive, but through conversations with interlocutors around and outside the archive. This "crucial learning along the way to discovery" (ibid.: 399) has been removed from the process of searching and finding out.

Another pitfall when looking for specific search terms in digital database sources (such as 'India', Indien or indisch in Berlin's archival databases) is that such searches usually lead to 'positive' results. By this we mean that even a meagre number like 20 hits in the database of a large archive, that normally carries kilometres of holdings, may appear to be highly rewarding. This sharpens our focus onto the frequency of mention of our search term but takes away our attention from how infrequently the search terms appeared in reality or "how other issues crowded your topic out in debates of the day" (ibid.: 392). Underwood emphasises that such searches can re-confirm any thesis a researcher wants to bring to them, apply and attest but at the same time they also "filter out all the alternative theses you didn't bring" (cit. in ibid.: 392).

Lastly, the strongest critique of digital search bases is what is often also viewed as their strongest advantage—the possibility of speedier access to information. Thus information so acquired, on the one hand can be highly rewarding and lead to new discoveries but at the same time it can also produce strong blind spots. This refers specifically to the case of those actors who are often outside the ambit of the printed and published world, who only make it to the archival sources indirectly as objects of historical enquiry—the categories of the rural, the non-literate, the servant during colonial times, the poor. Social histories, postcolonial histories and specifically subaltern histories have tried to re-situate these otherwise absent actors where they duly



belong, as active receivers but also mutual co-shapers of history and there has been much reflexive writing and debate within the discipline about questions of subjectivity and re-inserting agency in the voice of these subjects. These highly necessary debates are so far missing from the ambit of digitisation projects and database production. The number of databases accessible to users does not correspond proportionately with the number of platforms that reflect upon the nature of the sources, the nature of the ancestral roots of those sources etc. This does not imply that most archives in Germany or elsewhere offer such engaging debates to users of their databases—quite the contrary. But the practice of writing and debating the architecture of archives is not new to the discipline of history and part of learning the discipline is to engage with these debates. The same link cannot be made to digital databases that may or may not have archivists as their creators. There is indeed a slight danger that the digitisation of archival sources can lead to once again throwing back the invaluable sources, now readily available to one and all, into a vacuum where such debates are missing, where users only concern themselves with "sources" and not the problematic environments that the sources belong to.

### 2.2.2 *Digital Humanities: advantages*

One of the biggest promises of databases outside the ambit of those produced by archives is that they can help break conventional protectionisms. Putnam lucidly illustrates the dilemma with regard to national and regional archives:

Source-anchoring reinforced the nation-state bias that was built into our discipline from the start. The founders of the nineteenth century national states built archives in part to facilitate the immortalization of what in Latin America is called *historia patria*, affirmative history of the nation. We hewed to the geography those founders had traced, or subsections of it (provinces, municipalities), whether we wanted to or not. What was the alternative? (2016: 381, Emphasis in origina)

After the Digital Turn, the physical space of the archive, for decades regarded as the only refuge for historians to seek answers to their research questions, is no longer the unchallenged authority, neither is its own logic of structuring and ordering information. New databases, as the one we will present below, can open new ways of presenting the same information, re-structuring old categorisations anew, and therein assist in organising information along lines that trespass nation-statist projects. Thus, "[d]igital search offers release from place-based re-



search practices that have been central to our discipline's epistemology and ethics alike" (ibid.: 379). Besides, as most historians would note, such projects also offer a relief from the provincial protectionism of certain archivists, who value themselves as the indisputable watchdogs of information housed in archives.

Questions related to digitisation, however, do not always come with easy answers. An example deserves mention here: At the Lautarchiv (Sound Archive) of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, one finds shellac recordings of South Asian (among numerous others) prisoners of war that were made during and after WWI, in German camps. These recordings belong to a larger context of a detailed study executed by the Director of the Sound Department of the Prussian State Library, Wilhelm Doegen. During the war, approximately 1,4 million South Asian soldiers were sent by the British Empire to different battlefronts and 1,000 such soldiers became prisoners of war in German camps. The recordings of the South Asian soldiers comprise of poems, stories and songs read out in numerous South Asian languages. These recordings have been invaluable sources for historians who, through their work, have challenged the notion of the war being solely a European one (see Ahuja, Liebau & Roy 2011).

295

Over the past years numerous researchers have engaged with the rich material housed by the sound archive. Some have also re-brought the recordings to their geographical contexts (places of birth of the soldiers, as shown by the records of the archive and as narrated by the soldiers) and exchanged them in ethnographic situations with new generations. The question of digitisation and producing a database has long haunted the archive and those engaging with. Debates in favour and against abound. Those pro the move contest how numerous people in the South Asian context, where the soldiers came from, were outright unaware of these recordings and deserve that the information preciously preserved in the archive be shared with a larger audience. Those against the move usually raise issues of responsibility and what would be done with the recordings if they were completely digitised for open access. Who would be accessing them and for which purpose(s)?

A positive consequence of these debates certainly is that currently the Sound Archive attempts to start its own database, whereby users can at least access details on the recordings and the speakers in a bilingual format (German and English) even if the recordings will not be available online in their entirety. Such debates, hitherto largely inexistent, can trigger new energies for new research topics. Inter-





national researchers interested in the topic would nonetheless need to visit the archive to gain full access, but at the very least, these dialogues initiate a process of rendering such information, stored for decades in the archives, more transparent. It thus can be a mid-way solution to the conventional problem of protectionism usually encountered in many regional archives.

Another obvious advantage we have hinted at from the onset is that the world of Digital Humanities offers the opportunity to reduce travel costs and travel time tremendously. The transformation in structural conditions could also encourage users to transcend their own place or region-based bias and venture into newer territories. In the case of those who already have a regional expertise, it could also mean a prompt lead to further explore archives that were earlier unthinkable in writing entangled histories. This implies that a hint, a clue to a particular file in a database search can push historians to then further explore newer archives. Such possibilities have also existed in earlier historical research. Historians have indeed searched for and eventually found connections to their research topics by 'co-incidence' in other archival ambits. The influx of information offered by databases, however, adds a vigorous quantitative push to the fact that such episodes, that lead historians to archives previously not imagined to have any connection to their topics, become more frequent.

In the following section, we give a brief overview of the archival landscape in Berlin and how the issues mentioned above can be addressed when attempting to create new databases so as not to fall prey to the same blind spots.

### **3. The archival landscape of Berlin and its mixed inheritance**

As mentioned in the introduction to the article, our engagement with debates in and around Digital Humanities commenced when we were concretely faced with the project of designing a database on 'Modern India in German Archives, 1706-1989' (MIDA). For two years, the team visited numerous archives in the city of Berlin, with the aim of collecting information on Indian history and the history of Indo-German entanglements, with a specific focus on 'politische Bestände', political archival collections or holdings that bore special relevance for a political history of modern India or Indo-German entanglements. The larger objective was to reflect on how these holdings can offer fresh perspectives to international historians of South Asia by offering insights into collections that have hitherto received minimal systematic





attention. What is the potential of these holdings not just in writing the history of Indo-German entanglements since the eighteenth century, but also in terms of transcending the conventional frameworks of transnational histories? In other words, what can we learn through the rich history of Indo-German entanglements that we have not learnt from the exhaustively studied history of transfers and entanglements between the (British) colonial empire and India?

The primary archival sites included the Political Archive of the Foreign Office (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, from here on PAAA), the Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv, from here on BArch), the Secret State Archives of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, from here on GStA PK) and the Federal State Archive of Berlin (Landesarchiv Berlin, from here on LAB). Each of these sites has its own ordering principles, its own predecessors, and its institutions from which it inherited the records, notwithstanding the fact that often files have experienced transfers from one body to the other (e.g. the collection titled "Bestände der Handelspolitischen Abteilung des Auswärtigen Amtes von 1879-1920", which has witnessed transfers between the Foreign Office Archive and the Federal Archive in Berlin). The state and the federal state levels, however, do exhibit hierarchical relationships and ordering procedures within the general archival landscape in Berlin. Needless to say, as a researcher, one is never objectively outside these hierarchies. This implied that our research started in concordance with the hierarchical design that the landscape offered us i.e. the PAAA, followed by the BA and finally the regional archive LAB. It is only at the time of writing this article that we have explored newer possibilities in the GStA PK, which have added to the results obtained from the other archives.

When reflecting on how the archives operate and are inter-connected, especially in the case of Berlin, one also requires taking cognisance of the complex history of the city. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (1495-1806, Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation), North German Confederation (1866-71, Norddeutscher Bund), German Reich (1871-1945, Deutsches Reich), the rise and the fall of national socialism, the period of occupation by the allied forces after WWII and finally a divided past in West and East Germany: these, on some occasions divisive and on others overlapping, temporal and spatial categorisations are very well to be observed in the structures of the Berlin archives. This complex history of Germany in general, and Berlin in particular, also helps comprehend the multiple transfers, ex-



changes and the geographical displacement of the files from one repository to another over the years, not just within the city but also from and to other German cities. It also enables a researcher to grasp the structure of the archive or the record group plans (in German: Tektonik), which often are organised along temporal caesuras.

When thinking of archives at these levels of institutional memory production, one could imagine a relative protectionism on behalf of both the archives (as state institutions) as well as the archivists (as employees of the state). What surprises many researchers, however, is how these archives are constantly engaging in debates within Digital Humanities, not by reflecting upon them from without, but rather by affectively participating from within. The trends to be witnessed so far show that usually it is librarians and archivists who focus on "'sophisticated cataloguing strategies.' But computer scientists [...] have been more interested in developing sophisticated search engines that operate directly on the data we see (the web pages) rather than on the metadata (the cataloguing information)" (Rosenzweig 2003: 751).

In sync with a general mood that encourages re-thinking how finding aids should be renewed, especially by developing databases, almost no archive in Germany (at the very least the prominent 'big' archives) ignores the importance of having such databases. This process, in fact, is also not as new as it is claimed to be. The production of databases, and by that we do not mean the complete digitisation of all files contained in an archive's holdings, is a well-known practice for some years. The project of creating one's own database should then, one would estimate, not be any more work than 'finding India' in the archival database and transposing it into a new database. This, however, is unfortunately not as easy an exercise as it seems to be in theory.

What a researcher encounters in the archives is a mixed inheritance of the conventional finding aids and half-baked databases, half full of information on the holdings and half emptied of the descriptions, which are also subjectively done by archivists. Though for highly specific research questions for academic production this, in effect, would not make too much of a difference, assuming that the curious historian will in any case pay a visit to the archive, for large scale and more overarching projects like the one we engage with (MIDA) this produces more confusions than certainties. For researchers this implies a four-step process. First: working with the database of the archive to get a general overview of where one could find India in the holdings;



second: working with the conventional finding aids like indexes, registers and edited volumes describing the holdings, looking for India-related search terms in the indexes of the same when these are available, or else simply browsing through each page of the registers when such indexes are missing; third: finding coherence between the results from the database and the analogue search in finding aids; and fourth: after discussions with archivists, identifying which holdings have been entered in the database and which are still unregistered, and systematically searching for India related files in such holdings. The process of collecting information on India thus becomes a multi-layered one whereby a researcher consistently needs to check and cross-check the results from both the database as well as the conventional finding aids.

It is also important to add here that platforms like Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek<sup>6</sup>, Archivportal D<sup>7</sup> and Archivportal EU<sup>8</sup>, add an extra layer of external meta-data sources, collecting information on files housed in archives in Germany (in case of the first two) and even Europe more generally (in case of the latter). One can easily search for India-related files on such large meta-data platforms, sometimes to encounter certain files that have been digitised, without ever having to visit the archive i.e. the physical place called the archive. Such engines may give an idea of the structure of the archive's holdings and where one could find India in them, but they never provide a complete overview of all holdings or how the listed items relate specifically to India.

What the practical example of looking for India-related files in Berlin's archives shows is that these mixed repertoires of information in the archives and in databases outside the physical space of the archives, require that researchers employ mixed methods and triangulate their findings through numerous channels. It becomes lucidly clear that historians cannot remain un-reflected on these developments in and outside archives and need to critically re-think how research is and will be conducted in the coming decades in their discipline. As pointed out by Rosenzweig:

Thus historians need to be thinking simultaneously about how to research, write and teach in a world of unheard-of historical abundance and how to avoid a future of record scarcity. Although these prospects have occasioned enormous commentary among librarians, archivists, and computer scientists, historians have almost entirely ignored them. In part our detachment stems from the assumption that these are 'technical' problems, which are outside the purview of scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. (ibid.: 738)



All the above mentioned problems that accompany digitisation projects and databases in general need to be re-viewed through a critical lens. We can no longer abstain from engaging with the real-time impacts of such projects on our discipline. As mentioned already, precisely because of the half-baked nature of digitisation projects in and outside the Berlin archives, both conventional methods utilising finding aids as well as databases of the archives need to inform our historical research. What we will offer below is a sensitising framework that emerges out of these theoretical as well as methodological concerns. How can one pay heed to the debates, the disadvantages of Digital Humanities and how can one tap into the myriad resources it offers?

#### **4. Some remarks on the database for Modern India in German Archives, 1706-1989**

The database the team has been working with, called FUD<sup>9</sup>, has been conceived and designed at the Universität Trier, Germany. Like numerous other counterparts of its time, FUD allows for the storage of bulks of information and aims at making these results visible in a user-friendly format. There are three overarching sheets within the architecture of the database titled Archive (Archiv), Archival Holdings (Archivbestand) and Files (Archivalien). Each of these sheets further comprises detailed information, which is entered by the researchers and will eventually be available to the users. This information incorporates, among others, the field titled 'File Description' consisting of the time period covered by the file (from, to), the holding it belongs to, the title accorded by the archive, a brief description of the contents of the file as offered by the archive (through the database or finding aid registers and indexes) etc. The field 'Holding Description' informs a user about the date (i.e. period covered by the holding), title, code, the contents of the holding as defined by the archive, the official description of the holding, and finally a description of (added by the research team) how the holding relates to India. The latter emerges after systematically studying the descriptions of files that relate to India within that holding and then presenting a coherent sketch that summarises the thematic consistencies that can be traced vis-à-vis India in the holding.

It is important to add here that the aim of the team has been to collect information on India-related files and holdings in Berlin's archives, with a special emphasis on those that relate to the political history of modern India or Indo-German entanglements since the establish-



ment of the Danish-Halle Mission in 1706 (Dänisch-Hallesche Mission) up to the moment of the reunification of West and East Germany. This does not imply that the team sought to digitise each file; rather the objective is to offer users of the database a coherent overview of how these sources relate to India. In doing so, the database gives international scholars of South Asia an opportunity to get an overarching view of the Berlin archives, at the same time it does not preclude that scholars will have to visit the archives in order to carry out in-depth research. This is the first step in acknowledging the problems all databases face. While recognising that Digital Humanities becomes an imperative tool for historians to engage with, a possibility to re-think existing frameworks and archival limits and to think old questions anew, it nonetheless is not and does not aim to substitute research in the archives.

Below we describe the process of conducting research in the Berlin archives, some of the key points of consideration that have guided the research and how the database as a project, will nonetheless attempt to address the larger problems facing Digital Humanities.

#### *4.1 Provenance and pertinence principles*

301

The first question to be addressed when envisioning archival research on a specific theme relates to the choice of relevant archives. In tune with one of the key objectives of the MIDA project, which is to systematically collect relevant holdings on the political history of modern India in German archives, the obvious choices for 'political' archives in Berlin primarily include: The Political Archive of the Foreign Office (PAAA), the Federal Archive (BArch) and the Secret State Archives of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (GStA PK). Here the term 'political' poses the first dilemma: Not all archives possessing files which may be categorised under the general rubric of 'political' bear this nomenclature for the holdings or the record groups ('politische Bestände'). This becomes highly graphic when one casts a cursory glance on the seemingly not so important regional or regionalised holdings of the Federal State Archive of Berlin (LAB). Though a preliminary study of the record groups may suggest that the archive does not offer much on exchanges within the ambit of formalised politics between India and Germany, a systematic search reveals highly relevant sources.

The problematic of nomenclature (what are political collections?) points to a larger issue of systematisation and the logic behind how the



concerned archive comes to be structured in its current state. The Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology, published by the Society of American Archivists (2005) distinguishes between two ordering principles: provenance (Provinienz-Prinzip) and pertinence (Pertinenz-Prinzip). The principle of provenance is defined as "1. The origin or source of something. – 2. Information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection" (ibid.: 317). Alternatively, "[p]rovenance is a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection. The principle of provenance or the *respect des fonds* dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context" (ibid.: 317, emphasis in original). In contrast to this, the other ordering principle in archival terminology is the principle of pertinence. This is defined as: "A principle of arranging records based on content, without regard for their provenance or original order" (ibid.: 292).

Most German archives are usually not structured thematically but in accordance with the origins of their files i.e. in accordance with the principle of provenance. This implies that the holdings are or were categorised according to their relation to the offices they are/were collected or inherited from. Thus, the researcher has to cross, or at the very least, challenge these given categorisations and restructure the search for sources that she/he values as having a higher priority for her/his own research topic. For instance, a file that contains information on the visit of an Indian minister in Berlin ("Besuch der indischen Premierministerin Indira Gandhi", 1976) to be found in the Landesarchiv Berlin is categorised under the rubric of the C repository (C Rep) in general and C Rep 725-prak in particular. The C-holdings consist of files inherited from East Berlin's institutions between 1945-90. This incorporates files from the town council, the municipal authorities and their subordinate institutions, numerous state owned economic enterprises in Berlin, among others. This particular file in question, however, belongs to the sub-holding or the sub-collection (C-Rep 725-prak) titled 'Stadtbibliothek' i.e. collections received from Berlin's public library. Thus, a file that can be crucial for a diplomatic history of Indo-GDR entanglements in the sphere of formalised state politics does not appear under the rubric of 'political' collections but has seemingly made its way to a collection that one would associate more with files relevant for a history of intellectual entanglements.

When a database that focuses on a specific thematic is envisioned, for example the MIDA database that relates specifically to India or the



history of Indo-German entanglements, its structure will irrefutably challenge this conventional categorisation. The collections thus need to be re-ordered into a new architecture following the pertinence principle i.e. not according to their origin but according to the topic and sub-themes.

From the perspective of archival categorisation, this is a leap in the process of ordering. A resulting database thus inevitably re-configures the inner architecture of the archives it seeks to 'cover' or collect information from. This implies a de-and re-contextualisation of the information even at a meta-level.

#### *4.2 What constitutes the 'political'?*

If one moves from the meta-level of structuring to the level of the kind of history one is interested in writing, the term 'political' poses another overarching question (besides the one posed in section 4.1): what constitutes the political? Beyond the easily identifiable realms of formalised state politics and the usual suspects of political history, diplomatic history, constitutional history or public history, writing a history of Indo-German entanglements can incorporate numerous permutations and combinations of what constitutes the political. The term can become an effective tool in challenging fixed categories that define the architecture of archival organisation.

The following example may explain this lucidly: The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was recognised as a sovereign state by the government of India in 1972. The Trade Representations established in 1956 in New Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta, however, acted as the official 'mouthpieces' of the GDR state in India. Despite the absence of consular services and official recognition between 1956-72, the Trade Representations gradually expanded their nature of engagements, exchanges and entanglements with Indians (both within the ambit of formal state institutions as well as non-state actors) into arenas as varied as trade, issues of international politics (especially anti-imperialism and non-alignment), scientific cooperation and the overarching category of 'cultural relations.'

The absence of serious engagement with the political history of Indo-GDR entanglements during 1952-72 cannot be compensated under the rubric of the history of 'cultural politics.' Thus, when writing such a history of entanglements among actors belonging to varied backgrounds and fields of action, one has to irrefutably take due cognisance of 'cultural relations' which became an effective tool of





emphasising the question of official recognition. This requires asking what constitutes political relations especially when official diplomatic relations do not exist. It also implies avoidance of an oversimplification of sources, which have often conveniently been clubbed into the category of 'GDR propaganda' in the newly independent nations by earlier historical engagement. How is it possible to read how actors, who were clearly state-directed in their engagements with Indians, *utilised* the prevalent state vocabulary to enable and enhance the nature of exchanges in India?

In order to read against the prevalent historical dominant narratives, one needs to go back to the same sources and ask different questions. In doing so, one inevitably challenges classifications that find their roots in the provenance principle. For example in our particular case it would imply a 'political' reading of sources harboured under the rubric of 'Cultural Relations with India' ('Kulturelle Beziehungen zu Indien') in collections contained within the holding titled "Ministerium für Kultur" or the Ministry of Cultural Affairs (under the larger classification 'German Democratic Republic') in the Federal Archives. The provenance principle is thus open for de- and re-configuration through a re-reading of sources that could easily be dubbed as having great relevance for a history of cultural exchanges solely.

In the same vein, the challenge of collecting files that are needed to write such histories, one has to question the limitations put not just by academic traditions but also by the nature of archival classification. A graphic example of the same can be the Political Archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin which not just offers holdings on diplomatic relations and formalised state-led political exchanges in the sphere of India-FRG-GDR Relations, but also houses elaborate collections which are viewed as being outside the sphere of 'political relations' by the archivists. These include the highly rich collections on 'Economic Relations' and 'Development Aid.' Especially in the context of a world immersed in Cold War block politics, where development aid was considered as, if not more, important than other soft politics' tools like cultural diplomacy and scientific cooperation, the two Germanys' foreign policy proper cannot be analysed without paying heed to its obvious links to economic entanglements and the inevitable co-relation of development aid to how foreign policy towards India would effectively take shape. Thus, looking beyond the obvious choice(s) when searching a 'political' archive is already the first step in this exercise of transforming a structure of provenance into the individual order of pertinence.



#### *4.3 Producing new structures from old*

The act of creating a database, or even searching for sources to produce that database, incorporates processes of selective searching, editing, highlighting certain contexts and therein rendering others invisible. It finally necessitates presenting the obtained results in an aesthetic or material format that adds new dimensions to a pre-existing structure and process of categorisation or ordering i.e. eventually enacting a preconceived idea of what the purpose of such subjectively presented information can be. This subjective nature of the way information is presented haunts academics and cannot be undone by disclaimers but it certainly should not be camouflaged, rather engaged with and duly problematised.

The process of organising a database in accordance with the pertinence principle for the project has thus incorporated several steps that are sensitive to these challenges. Three of such possibilities are listed below.

The first is producing a keyword index (in German: Sachindex) for the new database. For each holding bearing relevance for India-related topics, the team has organically developed a list of keywords, which can help multiply the search carried out by the user of the database. Thus, while the archival guide to the database will engage with schematic texts that problematise sanitised categories developed by archival structures, at the level of the database, keywords will inter-link searches carried out by users. For example, a search of the pre-defined keyword "Handelsvertretung" or Trade Representation in the case of the GDR, can suggest a related search to the inter-linked keyword "Kulturabkommen" or Cultural Treaty. Whereas such a link may not be an assumed one for a user, a brief glance into the files concerning both keywords would immediately suggest that the treaty was officially signed between the Indian government and the Trade Representation of the GDR in India in 1969, thus connecting the themes of cultural diplomacy, trade relations and therein 'political' relations between the two states. To a researcher interested in a history of India-GDR relations, especially before the latter's official recognition by the Indian state in 1972, this opens the possibility of visually mapping the inevitable links between cultural diplomacy and trade relations. A database relying on the pertinence principle can thus offer the opportunity of diversifying search results, which result from systematically studying the contents of the files.



A second means that operationalises the pertinence principle is the systematic inter-linking of the individual holdings that consist of India-related files. Our experience in Berlin's archives showed that not only is the content of certain individual files crucially linked to that of numerous others but that certain holdings are also related to each other. A fruitful effort to expand the researcher's scope of enquiry and possibilities is to avail the possibility of listing the related holdings within the database (in the case of FUD this is the category of 'Relevante Bestände'). Besides, the record group plans ('Tektonik') can also be imported to the structure of the database, to render the structuring, as designed by the individual archives, transparent.

A third means to materialise pertinence is via the descriptions of the holdings that are developed by the research team i.e. those that particularly pertain to India as a topic of enquiry. These descriptions, as mentioned earlier, organically develop out of patterns that are traced in the contents of the individual files. They knit together India-related topics within the database and require a detailed studying of the files. On some occasions, our experience showed that in a particular holding, files that were related to India were highly scattered in terms of the themes they covered (see also section 4.5). In such cases, it is equally important to not force connections through subjective descriptions of the holdings so as to render the scattered nature of the archival structuring equally transparent for users.

#### *4.4 Triple layered contextual knowledge in the German archive*

The selection process unfolds by defining the search terms. A certain background knowledge or contextual knowledge of modern Indian history becomes inevitable here. There are two interrelated strands of discussion that we would like to introduce here.

Firstly, it is not necessary that all files that deal with topics related to India or Indo-German entanglements would carry the term 'India' in their titles or descriptions. One needs to duly comprehend the triple-layered context within which one operates in German archives. This includes, first: the general context in which the holdings of the archive are embedded, in other words, understanding the general nature of contents and topics covered by the holdings where one finds India-related files. Second: one needs contextual knowledge related to Indian history on the same topics during the temporal framework under consideration and third: at the very least, a general idea of the history of Indo-German entanglements within the time period of focus. For



instance, one of the sub-collections in the Federal Archives consists solely of the private papers and personal collections of notable personalities in Germany (Nachlässe).

A simple digital search in the archive database (Basys Invenio 2 for the federal archives) may reveal the presence of certain files, which carry the word 'India' in their titles or descriptions. If one views the descriptions of these files, one comes to acquire basic knowledge, known to all experts of India-GDR history, that the then-GDR Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl visited India in 1959, and that he was highly influential in furthering trade relations between the two countries as well as in the founding of several Indo-GDR friendship societies all across India. This information, however, may be unknown to numerous students interested in studying India-GDR relations. A database related search reveals that the term India appears ten times under the sub-collection Otto Grotewohl—in the holding called "Nachlässe."

Whereas a database search can make such information immediately available to beginners, what if there was no database to access such files (as is the case with numerous holdings which have not made it to archival databases) and the only method of undertaking research would be the conventional mode of archival research i.e. using finding aids? This could further be complicated in case one has to deal with inventories or finding aids, which do not contain an index. A researcher would then be able to 'search' only with due prior information. Thus knowledge on the topic, through an informed screening of secondary literature, prior to visiting the archives, becomes a pre-condition for both experts as well as beginners.

#### *4.5 Contexts as entangled histories in institutional structures and history in person*

Contexts cannot simply be seen as information frozen in time and space. Knowledge that guides the selection process in archives is never devoid of its own historical formation. When writing entangled histories, such contexts should not be treated as mere 'backgrounds' which formulate the first few paragraphs or pages of introductions to academic texts and monographs. Such writing essentially treats 'backgrounds' or 'contexts' as information that is truly a product of the past, de-temporalising its significance for the present and the future. On the contrary, writing entangled histories incorporates an active engagement with how such backdrops have historically informed the very nature of entanglements.



This refers to what Holland and Lave categorise as "history in institutional structures" (2001: 5) that reflects how the knowledge produced by individuals, particularly archivists and historians in this case, is in effect shaped by the larger institutional discourses that co-craft what is deemed as important information. Who is the perceived audience for such information and how do these contexts impact processes of how that information is presented? This refers both to knowledge housed and ordered in archives as well as that engaging with archival sources and produced in the form of academic texts.

The internal constitution of archives reflects larger paradigms of ordering and selection. 'Knowing' the information archives incorporate includes 'understanding' the discursive processes that materialised the structures that have eventually shaped the logic of the archive. Thus, what a researcher finds on India in Berlin's archives today is not simply knowledge that exists in a space-time vacuum but one that rather reflects how India was perceived as a subject of interest in diverse ways by German actors. It is information that was informed by larger questions: what did the practice of archiving mean in the German context (a context that was also subject to transformations over time)? What kind of historical production was undertaken on Indian history? And how were entanglements informed by what was being produced on India in Germany and vice-versa?

The teaching and studying of Indian history in Germany, in its own right, reflects multi-layered discourses on what Indian history does and does not entail through the German lens. Critically understanding these discursive processes underlying the 'standardisation' or the 'writing' of such histories can be a highly beneficial tool in engaging with searches in archives. Thus a report written by a university intellectual from East Berlin to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of the GDR after a research trip to India, shows not just the contents of the academic activities of the person in India, but also reveals other substantive information. This includes: the bureaucratic culture of writing reports for state ministries (every individual travelling to India was required to submit such reports to the state), the language used to write such reports (communistic rhetoric to be traced in the letters, for example, letters ending with the phrase "Hochachtungsvoll" or "mit sozialistischem Gruß"), the topics that were pushed for enquiry and found resonance in the East German academic scene (e.g. focus on labour movements or trade unionism), etc. All of the above open myriad channels to access the larger context of the GDR, albeit through reports written by individuals.



In that sense, archival research on specific topics relates to what scholars writing within Critical Discourse Analysis would term as 'Members' Resources' (Fairclough 1989). Members' Resources may be defined as knowledge that people possess which has been inculcated or acquired depending upon the social structures, systems or contexts they have inhabited. It refers to what "people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts-including their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions, and so on" (ibid.: 24). Searching for India in German archives does not just incorporate having such Members' Resources in Indian history but also having the same for the German context.

However, an understanding of 'context' ought to include, but should not be limited to, history in institutions solely. This may run the danger of reducing the actors who act in their everyday lives, and in effect are the producers of information stored in national archives, to being passive agents of larger institutional structures. Holland and Lave suggest a framework "[...] to approach history as something that is in part made in and by persons, and to approach the study of persons as historically fashioned" (Holland & Jane 2001: 30). As aptly summarised:

[...] the political-economic, social and cultural structuring of social existence is constituted in the daily practices and lived activities of subjects who both participate in it and produce cultural forms that mediate it. Claims that such relations lie at the heart of social investigation are at the same time claims that they are historical processes- that both the continuity and the transformation of social life are ongoing, uncertain projects. (Holland and Jane 2001: 4)

Thus, due recognition ought to be given to actors as being both situated in history but also as active negotiators and shapers of history. Context then is not limited to viewing individual actors within larger institutional structures but also relates to how actors' situated participation can produce creative and useful frictions that can be an invaluable source for writing a history of entanglements. Context thus comes to imply the ongoing relational and dialogic flow between what and how the archives re-present institutional memory and the life trajectories enclosed in the holdings of the archives, both mutually co-constituting each other.

In the case of how 'India' and Indian history is presented and categorised within national archives, which do not either belong to India nor to the former colonial empire's archives, it is nonetheless worth



asking how German national archives can add new dimensions to entangled histories. Entangling knowledge gathered from different archives, embedded in their respective nationalist frameworks, can help write histories that can be more nuanced and take cognisance of other perspectives. Such scattered knowledge should not be refrozen into national frameworks but rather used as an effective means to question the very same frameworks and understand the history of entanglements as reflective of larger transnational environments. It is here that Digital Humanities can offer a possibility for transcending nationalist or Eurocentric frameworks.

#### *4.6 From entangled histories to entangled archives*

It is important to note that it is not simply the histories of individual lives and collectives that are entangled but these entanglements are to be found among the archives as well. Not only are files contained in certain holdings in a particular archive, suggestive of such entanglements, but one notices how files and holdings in several archives can sometimes show consistent patterns of relationality. As historians, even those new to the age of digitisation and databases, we are well aware of how one's research on a particular topic leads us from one archive to another. It thus becomes inevitable to search for inter-linkages on themes among the archives in the midst of what often appears to be a scattered view. The same ought to be kept in view when undertaking research in databases or when creating a new database. An example from one of the holdings from LAB will illustrate this point.

The photograph collection of LAB organised primarily in the repository F, or the F-Rep. holding, exemplifies how scattered archival research, on a seemingly (both) general and specific topic (like India), becomes and how one's own method and scheme contradicts the organisational structure of a German archive. Applying India-related search categories to a search in the holding titled "Allgemeine Fotosammlung" (general photo collection), one is confronted with numerous hits from several contexts. The diverse nature of the topics encompassed in the photograph collection becomes clear through a collection of randomly picked samples. The images vary first in terms of location: photographs of Germans visiting India and vice versa. Secondly, the individuals represent completely different contexts: photographs of political elite on an official diplomatic trip neighbour those of visits of sports teams or groups of medical experts and finally individual representa-





tives pursuing cultural ties (i.e. playwrights, theatre groups, dancers, painters, authors) and those engaging in scientific cooperation. But these collections are not just restricted to individuals or collectives, as a large part comprises pictures of buildings such as museums of Indian or Asian art or embassies.

This is further complicated by the fact that not all photographs or pictures are to be found in F Rep. given that a considerable number can also be traced found in the private papers (Nachlässe) as well.

When pursued from within i.e. the inner logic of an archive, this structure does not seem to be confusing at all. It is the process of producing a topic-related systematisation of archival material that produces the impression of these samples as being diverse and scattered in nature. Here it should be mentioned that closely related to these are files (documents such as reports) as well as other photographs to be found in a different holding of the same archive (LAB) or those to be encountered in a different archive in Berlin. This may be exemplified by another graphic example- a dialogue between the GDR Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (during Grotewohl's visit to India in January 1959), open to media persons, is documented in detail in a file housed in the PAAA. One finds a copy of the same in a file in the BArch, Berlin. The latter, however, is also aided with photographs of the visit. Similarly, the photographs in F-Rep. in LAB may find connections to other files in the same archive or other archives. A seemingly loose picture that one de-contextualised by taking it out of the mass of a huge holding like F-Rep. may thus be re-contextualised in understandable structures once the strong interdependencies among different holdings and archives have been traced. So a topical research reveals entangled meta-structure(s) of archives, which are normally perceived as autarkic entities of knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

The article has listed some of the ensuing disadvantages and advantages within Digital Humanities. It points out that historians need to take cognisance of developments through critical reflection and writing. It then presented the archival landscape of Berlin and the mixed inheritance of digital databases and conventional analogue finding aids that researchers encounter in most archives. We have addressed the challenges and opportunities posed by digitisation projects and databases and produced a scheme to address the same. In conclusion, it may be



re-iterated that the most effective method of tapping into the potential of digital databases, produced within or without the archives, is to utilise them as a means to gain overarching views, explore new relational links between different topics and ask questions based on the same that were unimaginable before. This, however, could be more fruitful if it became another layer to add to how we conduct fieldwork, acquire situated knowledge or engage in analogue finding and finding out in the archive. The following excerpt sums up the point succinctly:

Technology is not destiny. As researchers, advisors, peer reviewers, and panel members, we have choices to make. The digital revolution has made finding things out about distant places and people, goods, and ideas that moved between them cheaper than ever before. The potential is real. But nothing guarantees that the growth of knowledge brought by fallen barriers, broader vision, and multi-scalar research will not be cancelled out by increased superficiality and new blind spots. If globe-spanning shine is perceived as the currency with which fellowships, article acceptances, and jobs are acquired, we will encourage scholars to invest in the most far-flung circuit plausible. Is this the best use of our hard-pressed humanities dime? Or should we take the digital dividend and invest it in building friction back in: expecting and rewarding engaged fieldwork, deep learning, and international collaboration designed and guided from South as well as North? [...] digital research that carries us deeper into real-world connection may indeed create the border-crossing wisdom that our border-riven world needs. (Putnam 2016: 401-2)

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The DFG funded project Modern India in German Archives, 1706-1989 consists of three partner institutions, the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, the Department for South Asian Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Leibniz-Zentrum Modern Orient, Berlin. For details on the project see:

<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/490538.html> [retrieved 20.12.2016],  
[https://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte\\_2014\\_2019/MIDA\\_2015.pdf](https://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2014_2019/MIDA_2015.pdf) [retrieved 20.12.2016]  
and

<https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/suedasien/forschung/projekte/aktuell/mida>.  
[retrieved 21.12.2016]

<sup>2</sup> For a programmatic approach on the history of entanglements see Werner and Zimmermann (2006). This approach offers a method of viewing entanglements and empirical intercrossings beyond approaches embedded purely in comparative and transfer studies. For a sensitising approach on the history of entanglements between German and Indian intellectuals see Manjapra (2014).



<sup>3</sup> Here an important point to add is that the distinction between the physical space of the archive and the world of digital metadata information is of significance to us. As the sections to follow will, however, illustrate this difference often becomes precarious in practice. This may become lucid through the example of four archives in Berlin: the Political Archive of the Foreign Office (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, or PAAA), the Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv, or BArch), the Secret State Archives of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, or GStA PK) and the Federal State Archive of Berlin (Landesarchiv Berlin, or LAB). In PAAA there is a database but a user has no access to it outside the physical territory of the archive. The database of the BArch can be completely accessed outside the archive. The GStA PK database is partially accessible outside the territorial constraints of the archive (this reflects in the fact that if one looks for a term like 'India' one gets approximately 70 hits when searching in the database outside the archive whereas 314 hits when searching in the same database inside the archive). In the case of LAB, the database cannot be accessed outside the archival territory (same database programme as PAAA viz. AUGIAS) but parts of the photograph collection are available online outside the archive (i.e. one can visually see some of the photographs in the collections). Thus, the archival landscape is interspersed with a combination of complete through mixed to no access via the digital databases. When archivists design and order information in these databases, they most certainly participate in the project of Digital Humanities. This is however not all encompassing information and we suggest the distinction between the physical, geographical space of the archive and the digital databases that archivists also engage with.

<sup>4</sup> Big Data refers to "the zillions of pieces of information that traverse the internet, flowing across the full range of human and nonhuman activity. In this sense it has some affinity with Big History, which begins from the principle that our engagement with the past knows no boundaries. So too Big Data. Consider just a few of its flows: social media conversations; transactions at the retail and wholesale levels; sensors monitoring movement of all sorts across the earth; climate; curriculums and student performance; financial data of any kind; sports statistics; the list goes on and on and on ..." (Grossman, James. 2012. 'Big Data': an opportunity for historians? *Perspectives on History*, March,

<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2012/big-data-an-opportunity-for-historians> [retrieved 05.11.2016].

<sup>5</sup> See Putnam (2016).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de> [retrieved: 20.12.2016].

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.archivportal-d.de> [retrieved: 20.12.2016].

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.archivesportaleurope.net> [retrieved: 20.12.2016].

<sup>9</sup> For details on the FUD database see: <http://fud.uni-trier.de/de/> [retrieved: 20.12.2016].

## Bibliography

Ahuja, Ravi, Heike Liebau & Franziska Roy, eds. 2011. *When the war began, we heard of several kings: South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi: Social Science Press.

Chassanof, Alexandra. 2013. Historians and the use of primary source materials in the digital age. *American Archivist*, 76 (2), pp. 458-80.



- 
- Holland, Dorothy & Jane Lave, eds. 2001. *History in person: enduring struggle, contentious practice, intimate identities*. Oxford: James Curry.
- Manjapra, Kris. 2014. *Age of entanglement: German and Indian intellectuals across empire*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Putnam, Lara. 2016. The transnational and the text-searchable: digitized sources and the shadows they cast. *The American Historical Review*, 121 (2), pp. 377-402.
- Rosenzweig, Roy. 2003. Scarcity or abundance?: preserving the past in a digital era. *The American Historical Review*, 108 (3), pp. 735-62.
- The glossary of archival and records terminology*. 2005. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists.
- Turnbull, Paul. 2014. Margins, mainstreams and the mission of Digital Humanities. In: Paul Longey Arthur & Katherine Bode, eds. *Advancing Digital Humanities: research, methods, theories*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 258-73.
- Unterwood, Ted. 2014. Theorizing research practices we forgot to theorize twenty years ago. *Representations*, 127 (1), pp. 64-72.
- Grossman, James. 2012. 'Big Data': an opportunity for historians? *Perspectives on History*, March, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2012/big-data-an-opportunity-for-historians> [retrieved 05.11.2016].
- Werner, Michael & Bénédicte Zimmerman. 2006. Beyond comparison: histoire croisée and the challenge of reflexivity. *History and Theory*, 45 (1), pp. 30-50.