

Agreements and Achievements – MICO in the German Bosch Archive

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Introduction

Company archives hold the materialized possibilities for firms to emphasize their historical significance and to create their tradition and can therefore be important for corporate identities and branding. Systematic “historical communication”¹ establishes the company’s image for board members, stakeholders and employees, as well as for outsiders, customers and partners. As a matter of fact, one can hardly speak of “the” company archive, as there are few overarching rules, and archival standards are – simply put – developed by the respective company’s interests. The experiences of researchers working with such archives will differ enormously, depending on the company. This article sheds light on the headquarters’ archive of one of Germany’s biggest global companies, Robert Bosch GmbH’s archive in Stuttgart, Baden-Wuerttemberg, and shows its potential for research on Indo-German economic relations.

Generally speaking, many large and still active companies such as Bosch store their own records, whereas many smaller and medium-sized companies that ceased to exist have deposited their holdings in the respective state’s economic archive (*Landeswirtschaftsarchiv*) or another suitable larger archive, e.g. the company J.M. Voith, which was active in India simultaneously with Bosch and whose material can be found in the Wirtschaftsarchiv Baden-Wuerttemberg, WABW.² In the latter case, the company’s collections usually become one single holding, as they are integrated into an existing archival structure.

Company archives hold material that ranges from advertising posters and photo albums through correspondences, contracts and balance sheets to technical drawings and artefacts, such as the end products of manufacturing from different time periods. In order to create a space to display those artefacts, there may be a corresponding museum, as is the case at the Daimler AG’s company archive, which is also based in Stuttgart. This direct connection to an institution determines the profile of the company for the public and reveals the importance that companies ascribe to retaining control over the material’s interpretation. Representational claims are therefore inherent to the nature of company archives and the files that are considered worthy to conserve. Besides, company archives are certainly not created with the independent researcher in mind, but for internal purposes or on legal grounds. The effects this has on the interactions between user and archive have to be considered.

Many firms view scholarly engagement with their variety of sources with interest, so if the initial inquiry about permission to conduct research is successful, it is often encouraged and one finds support from archival staff. However, it is obvious that, on principle, some

companies will not be open towards independent researchers working in their archives. The researcher should treat the archive as the company's private space, which can mean a necessary change in habits and approaches. If inexperienced in the field of business history, she is used to starting an investigation by going through digital or analogue finding aids, thereby accumulating a sense of the context of the files. One can initially be thrown off by the invisibility of finding aids and catalogue structures in many company archives. While economic state archives will generally have finding aids available for the researcher, it is a different story for those that are possessed by the firm. In the Bosch archive, for example, the database or catalogue is available solely to the archivists, who will then act as intermediaries using keywords provided by the researcher and by their own knowledge.

To respect Bosch's privacy regulations, MIDA does not publish details on files and holdings in the database. The main objective of this entry to the *Archival Reflexicon* is therefore to dispel possible concerns by guiding and inspiring future researchers towards working within the archive's boundaries. The article does not give a description of the original structure of the material, but rather hints at possible research routes with the files, while outlining the relevance of Bosch's activities in India.

“Historical Communication” by Bosch

Bosch's company archive is part of the company's department of “Historische Kommunikation” (C/CGC-HC). It is located in the central part of Stuttgart, the South German headquarters not only of Bosch, but also of other globally known companies, a fact that contributed to the deep connections Bosch shares with other locally based firms, which can be traced throughout various archives. One frequently encounters the name “Bosch” in the economic archive of the state of Baden-Württemberg, WABW, especially in the holding of the Chamber of Commerce, Stuttgart.³ Documents in the Daimler archive also reference partnerships with Bosch in the Indian context.

The Bosch archive was established in 1933 for the occasion of a “double jubilee”: 50 years since the foundation of the company and the 75th birthday of founder Robert Bosch. It was initially created as a museum with a corresponding archive. From 1992 onwards, the archive was part of the public relations department of the company until it was assigned to “Historische Kommunikation”. The archive comprises 2,500 running metres of records that consist of various materials: written records, technical drawings, photos and around 16,000 artefacts, such as spark plugs from different generations.⁴

Current research conditions are influenced by the archive's recent move within the city of Stuttgart. Files are stored in an external depot, away from the office space, hence spontaneous ordering of files is difficult and orders should be placed in advance. The archive decides on research permissions individually, as there is no obligation to let every researcher work with unlimited materials. As defined by the user regulations, research is generally authorized to anybody who can evidence “legitimate interest” in the firm's history, so this matter should be sufficiently explained in the initial approaching email.

The starting point for a description of the purpose of an *Archival Reflexicon* entry are the boxes: the standard grey archive boxes, carrying the file number in pencil, which indicates groupings of several boxes together as a holding (*Bestand*). Security levels assigned to each

box tend to be set restrictively and permits are given to each inquirer individually. A box in the Bosch archive is treated as a file (*Archivalie*) and collections of documents that do not necessarily belong together thematically are sometimes stored within the same file. In this manner, the box “3 0005 1560 Länder—Indien—MICO” holds documents that range from 1934 to 1996, containing newspaper articles, correspondences with partner company Moussel & Co. Ltd., the factory magazine “MICO Wheel” from 1994, a brochure for the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Vocational Centre in 1986 and a fair amount more.⁵

Such magazines and brochures, which are abundant throughout the archive, relate to and sometimes even specifically speak of a concept called “milestones”. It is used as a way to structure the corporate history chronologically, with achievements being the main benchmarks that define the path. Apart from the documents that are concerned almost exclusively with MICO (nowadays Bosch Limited) and India, ordering minutes of specific meetings can be fruitful. Here, the researcher should provide some knowledge of the tightest possible timeframe of interest. Combining this timeframe with a search for minutes (“Sitzungsprotokolle”, that often even carry the keyword “India” or “MICO” in the archive’s catalogue), the archivist can help locate minutes of relevant board meetings etc.

Bosch communicates being proud of its long involvement on foreign markets. However, as Johler and Sparacio (2011: 9) stated in their 2011 publication on *Gastarbeiter*:⁶ a lot can be found about Bosch in the world, but not quite as much about the world at Bosch. This observation is definitely true for the Indian context, as well. Most of the India-related material that one is provided with in the archive will cover the actions and the representation of Bosch and its German employees in India, while few records illustrate a reverse exchange.

Bosch (in) India

The history of Bosch in India started in the early 1920s with the establishment of a representative office in Calcutta. The sales house Illies & Co. from Hamburg imported spark plugs, magneto ignition systems and other auto components to British India. In the beginning, however, Bosch was unable to compete with the established British and US suppliers. After the Second World War, it was rather difficult for Bosch to re-establish itself internationally in the so-called industrial countries, since many of its factories abroad had been destroyed or expropriated. They decided to concentrate on promising markets that they had previously not given much attention, such as India (see Bähr/Erkner 2013: 333).

Success came gradually: according to the representatively designed “A Short Memoir of Bosch India” (Bosch Ltd. 2014: 17), Bhailal Patel from the Bosch company Kino-Bauer suggested establishing a base in India shortly after independence. Following this, the year 1951 marks an important year in the history of Bosch in India. It is the founding year of the Motor Industries Company Ltd. (MICO), of which Bosch instantly bought 49%, upon discussing larger investments in the Indian automotive industry with Daimler-Benz (Bähr/Erkner 2013: 333). MICO was founded by K.C. Varma and Raghunandan Saran as a subsidiary of Ghaziabad Engineering Co. (GEC), the main distributor of Bosch products in India at the time (see Bosch Ltd. 2014: 15). Things moved fast from here onwards: MICO became the sole distributor, and after the Indian state implemented restrictive import regulations, a factory was set up at Adugodi, Bangalore in 1953 to manufacture spark plugs, nozzle holders,

filters and fuel-injection pumps by Bosch license. A tool-room apprenticeship scheme was implemented in the same year, a Vocational Centre followed in 1960.

By 1961, 2,000 people worked at the Bangalore plant, which had already started export business, and 57.5% of MICO shares had been bought by Bosch, an act that Herdt (1986: 105) described as “strengthening the technological umbilical cord to MICO”. The affiliation with MICO as a “self-sufficient and strong” example of a Bosch partner manifested itself in the motivation to invest and in the ubiquitous will to diversify production along with India’s changing industrial market (Ibid.: 106). Large sums were invested in MICO plants in India in the late 1960s and early 1970s: a second plant was installed in Nasik in 1969-1971, a third in Naganathapura in 1988. Products from the Nasik plant were exported to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and other countries around the world, while the Naganathapura plant contributed to diversifying production. By acquiring other companies in various sectors of engineering, such as control and motion technologies etc., Bosch output became additionally diverse in India over the years, as well. The partnership with MICO would go on, and in the late 1980s, the second-largest number of Bosch employees outside of Germany was based in India (behind Brazil; Bähr/Erkner 2013: 425) until eventually, in 2008, MICO was renamed Bosch Limited.

Even though the Bangalore plant initially struggled to make a profit, most publications by and about Bosch stress its contribution to the growth of India’s automotive industry (e.g. Langenscheidt/Steinruecke 2011: 84; Herdt 1986: 106; Bosch Ltd. 2014: 17, 37-39). Bosch communicators were generally more transparent about the role of their own financial and business interests than some other German companies in India were. Bosch being one of the first companies to get involved in development aid, for example in the context of the production of water pumps for agriculture, is an achievement notably verbalized (Herdt 1996: 107; see also Bosch 1961: 111).

In their representative portrayal of big German companies in India, Langenscheidt and Steinruecke stated that a part of Bosch’s ability to grow in India was due to distributing accountability amongst Indian agents: “[This] has also widened the scope of responsibility for local management and developed Indian talent” (2011: 84). Statements that hint at aid in developing a new Indian workforce are found throughout the archival material, too. The aforementioned brochure for the Vocational Centre from 1986 speaks about the “human factor” that has to “keep pace” with new machinery, illustrating the general struggle of factories to adjust training facilities to parallel technological advances.⁷ Special attention was given to sectors that required high-precision handling skills, such as manufacturing fuel-injection pumps. Since the MICO Vocational Centre collaborated with the Indian government in developing the Apprentices Act of 1961, the means of training at MICO did not merely have theoretical ties to the regulations of training on a national level. The Centre itself explained its impact in the following words:

[Man] can only be as effective as he is allowed to be by his relationships with men and machines. Hence, to be a contributing member of his group, man has to be in harmony with his working environment. Especially as technologies reshape workshops and other workplaces, and machines gain in sophistication, the human factor has to keep pace. The answer lies in training and

development. The development of human resources cannot be left to individual initiative. It has to be built into a planned programme and implemented as a conscious and sustained effort. This has been the guiding philosophy in MICO.⁸

When West German companies began to invest in India by building factories in the 1950s, they soon complained about a lack of skilled workers on the ground. Many stated that Indian graduate engineers had not undergone any practical training at all when they were led to the machines (see Hunck 1963: 70). The importance of practical skills in contrast to academic knowledge was henceforth stressed. At MICO Vocational Centre, graduate engineers and other university-educated personnel were trained in manual skills in one-year courses. Apprentices who had not undergone academic education before were trained for three years as “trade apprentices”. They were trained as electricians, fitters, grinders, machinists or millwright mechanics.⁹ Information of this sort is easily located in the records at the Bosch archive, since statistics and summaries of MICO’s performance were communicated through the material published for stakeholders and the in-house magazines, as well as in stored reports or articles by third parties.

The records

Mostly in German, sometimes in English, the records date from approximately the 1930s onward and are successively extended. These earliest files on Bosch in India mostly relate to sale houses selling Bosch products in India, such as GEC. As the company from Stuttgart was preparing to collaborate, informative material of a general sort about India and its economy was collected. The files reveal considerations of profitability and strategies to get involved on the Indian market. After the involvement with MICO had been established, the material represents the expansion of the company, grouped around core elements such as plans for the construction of further plants in Nasik and Naganathapura. Correspondences that are found in the boxes additionally deal with the Bosch sales partners in India, data on imported products or foreign exchange developments. Other types of files, like the occasional minutes of board meetings of MICO, Annual Reports, balance sheets, statistics and ratios, are scattered over the boxes.

Within company archives, holdings are often partly related to important board members or other decision makers, e.g. after inheriting their private papers. This particular form of organization shows internationality as an obvious aspect of the business. High-ranking employees or chief board members travelled around the world frequently and left correspondences, reports, schedules and minutes. In the early 1950s, Bosch also built factories in Australia and Brazil and got more involved in the Japanese market by selling licenses (Herdt 1986: 154-156). The simultaneity of these ventures is mirrored in the boxes at the archive. Attending important negotiations in India and in Brazil within a short time span, the records by the most important decision makers are then stored close to one another, sometimes even in the same box or folder, and can open global perspectives for the reader. Trips were planned meticulously, with duplicates and quintuplicates of the travel schedules, whether it was for the visits of high-ranking Indian employees to the FRG or the other way around, or, for example for a visit of Abid Hussain, who came to Stuttgart to visit the company in 1988 in his role as a member of India’s Planning Commission.¹⁰

Among the German men on the Bosch side, the name Hans Merkle is mentioned with high frequency in the records related to MICO . Merkle was managing director of the financial department from the late 1950s onwards and then continued to shape the business throughout the decades as chairman of the management board (1963-1984, which is a crucial time period for Bosch's activities in India). An honorary member of the management board, he passed away in 2000. In the '50s, '60s and '70s, the Bosch management board included up to more than a dozen men at the same time. Another name that can be pinpointed in relation to India is Paul Stein, who was in Bosch's legal department from 1953 onwards and left the MICO directory board in 1989. To the public, he was not as representative as Merkle, but his influence was certainly not small, as his signatures on many correspondences indicate (see also Bähr/Erkner 2013: 311). The Indian MICO men are less often visible in the Stuttgart archive, even though some stand out, such as Bhailal Patel. Patel was a member of MICO's directory board from 1955 onwards and became chairman in 1969 and President of the Indo-German Chamber of Commerce (IGCC) in 1963-1964. He remained chairman emeritus until his passing in 1983. At the festivities for the 25th jubilee of MICO, for which Merkle had also travelled to India, Patel gave a speech that can be found in the archive and that speaks of the history of MICO, the business relations, the agreements and the achievements made in the course of the collaboration.¹¹

Representative material like Patel's welcome speech, collected newspaper articles that mention Bosch in India or MICO, brochures and so on constitute the majority of the records available to researchers. Representative are also internally published things, such as the scattered versions of the factory journal "MICO Wheel". Many of these internal publications were meant for stakeholders. An intriguing thing to stumble upon in this material, besides the unique information on the factory's concerns, is the advertisements. They are not necessarily for Bosch or MICO, but mostly for other West German companies that were active in India in one way or the other. For example, many companies put up a one-page advertisement in a magazine on the Hanover Trade Fair in 1984, distributed amongst companies by the Indo-German Chamber of Commerce (IGCC), e.g. companies like Otto or Bharat Fritz Werner.¹² Not only do the advertisements signify who was active in India at the time, they often include much lengthier texts than what is common today, providing information about activities, rhetoric and world view. For example, a MICO advertisement in the IGCC magazine offers insights into its target group by equating "tradition" (represented by a photo of two hands carving ivory deity figurines) and "modern technology" (two hands holding a small metal machine part), stating that the "India of today is a happy blend" of both.¹³ Advertisements like this catered to conservatives as well as progress enthusiasts, and to the blend of both.

This magazine and other publications by the IGCC that Bosch collected also show the kind of information and guidance that was sent to Bosch and other companies and was being stored there. Especially the IGCC's informative output can be of great value for research on the Indo-German economic entanglements of the latter half of the 20th century, as they provided not only guidelines, but also concrete statistics, such as lists of firms that were looking for export partners.¹⁴

Research Outlook

Though this overview could by no means be exhaustive, interesting outlooks for possible future research derive from the engagement with the material. Generally, the archive can relate to research areas of Indo-German economic collaboration, technical education, business history and the history of technical developments. There are many possible routes for research with the Bosch archive and, as far as is known, there has to date not been an intensive academic engagement with the Bosch-MICO matters.

The archive shows company ethics, values, politics, visions, ideologies and interests that one can certainly interpret regarding their representation in India. The lens of the German archival material can help broaden perspectives, as the material provides possibilities to trace stories of transnationality and global connections. Connecting the findings from the Bosch archive in Stuttgart with other archival material, such as the aforementioned state economic archives, the company archive of Daimler Benz or the National Archives of India (which held discussions on the Apprentices Act 1961 and on import regulations affecting MICO), will surely be a challenging but rewarding approach.

Tracing business networks through these archives offers the opportunity to include small companies in the research as they become visible through their partnerships with large entities such as Bosch. Business links will reveal and reflect certain discourses of the time, of different approaches to trade or partnership, and of possibly changing and varying concepts of “the firm”. The Bosch archive offers possibilities to uncover nuanced histories in the material and to place them within corporate history, but also outside of it. In the end, one has to read the records in a way that appreciates and problematizes the representative nature of the records.

Archives

Robert Bosch GmbH, Historische Kommunikation (RB)

Wirtschaftsarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart (WABW)

Endnotes

- ¹ The German term “Historische Kommunikation” is used mainly by companies to engage with their own history. It is directed at marketing, corporate identity and image.
- ² The WABW can be found in the MIDA Database.
- ³ Wirtschaftsarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart (WABW), Bestand A 16.
- ⁴ The numbers are from 2016; the information was received from the archive.
- ⁵ Robert Bosch GmbH, Historische Kommunikation, 3 0005 1560.
- ⁶ Together with students from the University of Tübingen, Johler and Sparacio tried to at least partly close this gap through their publication and a related exhibition, for which they interviewed several of the former workers who continued to live in Stuttgart.
- ⁷ Robert Bosch GmbH, Historische Kommunikation (RB), 3 0005 1560.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ RB, 1 017 004.
- ¹¹ RB, 3 0005 1560.
- ¹² RB, 1 017 038.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.

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