Information Management in Archives and Museums : a pragmatic approach

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Abstract : *The paper shows the different aspects of archives and museums regarding management of information. The paper tries to highlight the common features, specialities, differences of these two information centres of the society. It also brings out the importance of these in the modern information society.*

Keyword : Information Management; Archives; Museums

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1. Introduction

The role of the museums and archives in communication of information is an established fact. The two organizations are information repositories, and play a great role in the retention and management of information. There is a basic difference in the storage form of information in these organizations – one consisting of objects, the other records; but the historical and archival value of both of these are the same, and can never be compared with each other. These two assets of cultural heritage entice and inform the masses – but the museums cater to the common people as well as researchers, and therefore the tiers of people they reach are varied and vast; whereas archives cater mainly to the special type of users, i.e. researchers who are deeply interested in some historical documents. But it is to be noted that both of these organisations store objects or documents which have a long lasting historical value. Therefore proper management of these two institutions is the need of the hour.

2. Archives and Museums

Museums and archives are siblings that have forgotten their common parentage. They share history and have recognizably similar features. Nevertheless, few researchers have explored the commonalities. The boundaries that exist between museums and archives are often disintegrated

by the professionals, who try to exchange information and educational preparation that could result in better serving their shared goals of collecting and preserving our cultural heritage. Information in all forms must be collected and preserved for future generations. Maintaining boundaries between museums and archives prevents us from fulfilling that obligation. (Lipinski, 2002)

Museums and archives share many goals and functions. These two information centres work in the same cyclic order, as follows:

Collection/Selection ⟶ **Information** ⟶ **Repository**

The materials that museums and archives **collect** echo the human spirit. Artefacts and books and manuscripts are all documents of the long enduring human thought and activities. They have been produced by people putting energy into telling their stories. Objects also have the power to summon forth stories and connotations of all kinds. Susan Pearce (1992, p24) has written that "The potential inwardness of objects is one of their most powerful characteristics, ambiguous and elusive though it may be. Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise" Museums and archives serve as vehicles of individuals' identity preservation. They are places in which people entrust their most treasured items. Letters, diaries, a grandmother's wedding dress, scrapbooks, collection of coins can be entrusted to a museum or archive, and the donor can be assured of professional care. Unruh, a professional, found that people attempt to solidify their identity primarily through accumulating legacies of letters, journals, memos, and poems, and also through collections of objects like photographs and jewellery (1983,p340-51). These are often distributed to those, who will care for them in the hope that their memories will live on in these collections. Often archives and museums are the recipients of these hopes and

collections, standing as institutions conferring and guarding the personal immortality of the public.

The archives and museums form an essential and significant part of a nation's **information** resources, and that programmes for their management and use are, or should be, an integral part of the national information system. The archives and museum services deal with information bearing materials generated within the administrative system of important organizations (whether government or private institution or organization), while on the whole, library and document services deal with information bearing materials acquired from outside.

Repository commonly refers to a location for storage, often for safety or preservation. There is a wide range of repositories that curate archaeological collections, both material remains and associated records. While each repository is unique in its size, staff, funding, organization, and collections, there are general types of repositories with similar characteristics. The broad categories of repositories are therefore Museums and Archives. (Ballofet, 2005)

'Repositories' are archival institutions primarily responsible for personal papers, artificial collections, and records of other organizations.

Museums are probably the most common type of repository. A museum can be defined as "a permanent, non profit organization, essentially educational and often aesthetic in purpose, which, utilizing professional staff, acquires tangible objects, interprets them, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis" (Malaro 1994,p81).

Most archives hold some personal papers or records of other organizations. For e.g., the National Archives of the United States has a small group of donated personal papers and nongovernment records along with other collections. Similarly, many manuscript repositories serve as the archives of their own institutions. In recognition of this, the term "archives"

gradually has acquired broader meaning for some archivists and is used by them in reference to any archival institution. This trend has been accelerated by the use of the word 'archives' or 'archive' in the names of some institutions that in the past might have been termed 'manuscript repositories'.

3. Information Management

Information management is the application of management principles to the acquisition, organization, control, dissemination and use of information relevant to the effective operation of organizational performances. It deals with the value, quality, ownership, use and security of information in the context of organizational performances. Information is valuable in terms of cost and quality. Cost and quality are vice – versa. There are two aspects of value – commodity aspect and ethical aspect. Ownership implies the owner of a copyrighted material. Ownership deals with the authentic, security, privacy of a material, whereas use means to apply the information in personal work. Unless and until it is used, it will cease to be information.

Right to Information has much to do with information management. In connection with Right to Information, the control of information becomes important and we are bound to provide information at any cost. So, control becomes important, because whenever one starts to give information in the light of Right to Information, the factors like copyright, legacy, privacy, security comes into focus for which control is important.

Overall, there are three important factors of Information Management:

- What information we are capturing?
- How we are controlling the information?
- How we are making the information useful for the users?

The above questions and relevant points are applied equally in libraries, museums and archives since all these three institutions are storehouse of information, processors of information and cater to the use of information for the users or visitors. Therefore, much critical thought come in the working sphere of information management in these three repositories.

Many scholars have defined information management in different ways :

According to Kerry, "Information Management is a methodology for identifying, existing information resources within an organization" (Singh,2001,p18). Taylor and Farrell said, "Information Management is the exploitation of more effective use of information for decision making and planning in an organization by managing information resources" (Singh,2001,p18). Again Tom Wilson defined, "The systematic and purposeful acquisition of information and its systematic and purposeful application are expressing as the new foundations for work, productivity and effort throughout the world" (Singh,2001,p19).

Therefore, if we analyse these three definitions, we get three pillars of information management: -

- **IDENTIFICATION**

- **MANAGING**

- **APPLICATION**

3.1 Information management in museums

Museums serve as a great source of enhancement to human knowledge, as it provides wide information about ethics, culture and other important aspects of a country.

The various items of information management in museums are as follows: (Banerjee, 2005)

<u>Acquire</u> – It means to obtain legal ownership of a work via gift, purchase or other means. Acquisition also includes events involving the negotiation to acquire.

<u>Accession</u> – Accession is the process of entering an acquired object into the official collection catalogue. Broadly speaking, these are a sequence of events following the process of establishing legal ownership, the registration of objects and the documentation of the most recent change of provenance. An accession may be connected to a list of stipulation and legal limitations, regarding what may be done with the item, how these may be loaned, exhibited or reproduced.

Example – The museum of Asiatic society maintains accession register and assigns the number in the following way

3/10, 2/24, 2/12 ..etc. where 2 or 3 is the number representing the class and 10 or 24 is the serial number of the object under the above mentioned class.

<u>Classification and Cataloguing</u> – It implies to determine the placement of the object within a predetermined and systematically organized filing structure. It also implies to describe an object according to established data classification or areas of interest, to classify by establishing attributions. Before the use of database management system, collection of catalogues are usually physically organised according to a classification scheme, and were often cross – indexed according to other principles by physically duplicating at least the portions of the objects and rearranging them.

Typically accession cards are arranged in accession order, by artist, by historical style, by the objects' physical location, by donor, etc. Computerized databases have made this kind of duplication redundant.

Example – In the museum of Asiatic society the coins are classified as per dynasties, like, *Yadava, Kushan*, etc.

And, the catalogue card of these coins reflects the information in the following manner

Class: Kushan

Ruler :Ramachandra

Date :1271 – 1309 AD.

Metal: Gold

Weight : 3.8 gm

Size : 1.750cm

Acc no:3/10

Exhibit – To show a work with others related to it, or by itself. Exhibits may be permanent or temporary. An exhibition usually implies an intended audience. During exhibition, an object is often removed from the collection. Exhibits are usually tied to a set of activities, taken on by the education department, that may include scheduling lectures, tours etc.

Example - Since the foundation of the Asiatic Society, books, manuscripts, drawings, coins, antiquarian and other objects of historical importance are exhibited to the society's meetings, and kept in the custody of the Secretary.
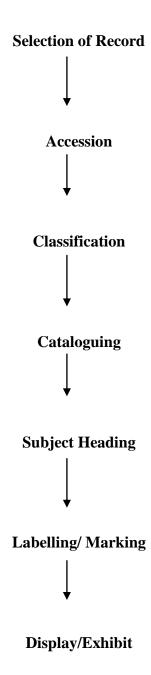
3.2 Information Management in archives

To manage information in archives to cater to the needs of their respective clients, the archivist in the archives usually stores and retrieve information in records deposited for permanent preservation. The process is depicted as follows: (Singh,2001,p34).

Selection of Record

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Accession

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Classification

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Cataloguing

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Subject Heading

↓

Labelling/ Marking

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Display/Exhibit

Selection of Record –

Record selection is a very important function in the management of archives. It is essential for any archive to prepare the selection criteria, which will help them to identify the documents, which are to be archived.

Example: The selection procedure of West Bengal State Archive is

- Documents must be 30years old

- Documents should contain historical and administrative values

For e.g., in 1942, Tamluk in Midnapore district, became independent for 41days. Many papers were written in pencil, named "Mahabharotio Jukto Rastra". So these papers have historical values which need to be archived.

Accession –

The accession register is a means of primary recording system. Accession is the act and procedures involved in the transfer of legal title, and the taking of records or papers into the physical custody of an archival agency, record centres or manuscript repository. An accession is generally a set of records transferred to the Archival repository at a single instance from a single entry within the organization's hierarchy.

Example: West Bengal State Archives accessioned a document before shelving them. These were accessioned under the following headings:

Sl No	Date	Provenance	File Title	File No/ Location
1	12/04/1989	Board of Trustees	Founding Documents And Histories 1967 – 1974 Legislative Proclamations	1A1.1-4

Classification –

Classification is the idea of deciding the relative placing of things, and the records representing them on the basis of grouping.

Example: For classification of documents, the State Archives uses a classification system developed by the Archive itself – named "Principle of Provenance". Its part is usually, like this:

Chronology ⟶ Branch ⟶ Department

14c20/2003

Here, 2003 represents the chronology, 20 representing the Branch and 14c Department.

Cataloguing –

The catalogue might be compared with the index of a book. The index provides the reader a way to find information in the book, without having to read every page. The index tells the reader the page on which the information about a specific subject can be found.

Subject Heading –

A subject heading is a search term used to describe the subject content of an information resource. Subject headings bring together all resources. In other words, it is a term, name or phrase used as an access point in a catalogue, or index which is arranged by topic.

Example: "Founding Documents and Histories 1967 – 974 Legislative Proclamations" this is the name of the file, and is the subject heading too, which has been indexed.

Labelling / Marking –

Labelling or marking is an important job in archive in order to identify the file or document easily. This method should be clear, precise and easily visible, to save the time of personnel of the Archives in retrieving the required document.

Example: 14c20/2003 is the label on a shelf in the State Archives.

Dispoay or Exhibit –

Presentation of exhibits or displays has become an objective of the State Archive. This is needed to spread the awareness of the historical data and show the importance of Archive in the society. The displayed objects are usually kept under glass cover but the documents are not original, but photocopy of the original file is kept.

Example: West Bengal State Archive made various exhibitions, like photo exhibition on Sepoy Mutiny, in these archives at 43, Shakespeare Sarani, Kolkata.

4. Retrieval of Information

Information retrieval pertains to the findings of the required information available in the database. Information retrieval is a communication process, by means of which the authors or the record creators communicate with the readers. In this process, there may be a time lag in between the creation of the message and its delivery to the information retrieval system user.

Retrieval of information in case of the museum is to take a work from storage to display to an interested observer, to place an exhibit, or to send out, to remove a work from exhibition or a permanent display. The computer may store an objects permanent location and its current location. (Smith, 1995)

Archives and other cultural organizations increasingly make use of electronic resources in the form of online public catalogue, online databases, and CD – ROMs. This move to electronic management of archives is reflected by the emergence of Digital Libraries. Digital picture archives use metadata to provide flexible description of the images within them, in order to index and consequently retrieve those images.

There are various models or techniques for archival information retrieval like :

a) Information Retrieval Languages, consisting of natural language and artificial languages; b) Retrieval Techniques including search strategy, whose objective is to identify the type of information desired, and more so its quality, the reliability required, and the nascentness of the information, etc.; c) Text retrieval including hypertext and expert system, which examines the language used to describe the needs of users, looking for the words and the pattern that should appear in the record; d) Automated retrieval system which provides online retrieval of information, and allows random enquiries to any concerning individual records and enables almost instant response to the queries.

5. Conclusion

The degree of similarity between the museums and archives makes it clear that they are closely related. Archivists are familiar with the nature and characteristics of all types of human documentation - from ancient Egyptian papyrus to contemporary computer e-mail. Museums and archives have similar technological needs. Both use computers to catalogue, track, and index materials. Many museums and archives use the same database programs. The most talked about topic in the museum world is the virtual museum. The archival world is grappling with the issue of electronic records. Articles on digital images are appearing in museum and archive journals too. Conferences on the topic of electronic access in these disciplines, like libraries, archives and museums are flourishing, and are attended by information professionals regardless of their institutional or disciplinary membership.

The museum and archives both collect, preserve, and make accessible materials for research; but significant differences exist in the way these materials are arranged, described, and used. The museum curator and the archivist are associated in their professional needs; however, the museum curator collects, studies, and interprets mostly three-dimensional objects, while the

archivist works with paper, film, and electronic records. Although archives and museums are considered to have the same function, they are distinct institutions that follow different sets of standard principles and practices in managing their respective collections. Museums are often considered by the people of society for leisure or for tourist activities, and not a place one goes compulsorily for research, as is the case with many archives.

But whatever small differences exist in the process of management or information seeking method, the overall objectives of these two important information repositories are similar, with a broad diameter of common vision and mission.

The future of these two institutions depends on how efficiently and promptly these recognize their potential resources, especially in a country like India, and effectively adapt themselves to the changing environmental needs.

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