

Indian Association for Women's Studies: Western Regional Workshop
Archiving Women's Lives: Perspectives and Techniques
Organised by IAWS and the Dept of Sociology, University of Mumbai
Jan 19 and 20, 2007

Every seminar has an 'origin story'. The idea of this workshop came up when we at the EC were mulling (as indeed had several previous ECs) over how to manage the huge mass of IAWS papers and documents accumulated over a quarter century. The 'moving secretariat', the outcome of the IAWS general body's consistent commitment to de centralise and de hierarchise, had the inevitable fall-out of having to transport huge cardboard boxes stuffed with papers to wherever the secretary was located. The papers had to be weeded out and made more compact, the important ones for running the organisation separated out and those relevant for charting a history of women's studies in India archived. As we engaged with this task concretely, we realized the need to learn more on the what, why and how of retrieval, selection and archiving with a gendered perspective. The topic had not been explored much, but was a widespread felt need and moreover dovetailed with our larger interest in the theme of Women and Knowledge Production for the forthcoming national conference at Lucknow.

Objectives

Derrida reminds us in his 'Archive Fever' that "the archive is not simply a recording, a reflection, an image of the event. It shapes the event. The archivization produces as much as it records the event." Recent social science scholarship, particularly feminist and historical, has expanded, nuanced and democratised our understanding of an archive.

The workshop aimed to provide a space for discussion in the context of three contemporary trends : i) critique from feminist historians on the need to address and redress the absence of women in accounts of history ii) newer approaches within history and other social sciences that privilege alternative sources, and search consciously for activities and expressions of subaltern groups iii) explosion of innovative techniques and technology for retrieval, preservation and archiving. It aimed to create a dialogue on combining gendered perspectives with informed choices of technology, based on need and relevance.

Participants

The workshop attracted a large number of participants of diverse composition : college teachers , post graduate and research students and faculty from the social science and humanities from Mumbai University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, SNDT's Research Centre for Women's Studies, Maharashtra Stree Abhyas Vyaspeeth, members of NGOs and women's organizations. It was noteworthy that staff from Godrej Archives, Ackworth Leprosy Hospital Archives, Bapu Trust Archives in addition to feminist archives and documentation centres attended. Senior members and past office bearers of IAWS like Neera Desai, Rohini Gawankar, Usha Thakkar, Chhaya Datar, Veena Poonacha were present, as were some of the current EC members . There were 85 participants on the first day and 70 on the second.

Workshop Structure and Content

The resource persons at the one and a half day workshop included artistes, film makers and film technologists in addition to academics from history, anthropology, women's studies, and sociology, documentalists, archivists and women from grass roots organizations.

A special feature was that a deliberate attempt was made to break the distinction between 'work' and 'entertainment'. The cultural programmes held outside the business sessions did not merely enliven and relax the participants, but had been planned to flow from and into the content and concerns of the workshop. Ideas presented in the papers got vividly and concretely illustrated in these programmes which were furthermore open to all. Thus, just before the start of the workshop, the CWDS exhibition of photographs : ***'Re-presenting Indian Women 1875 to 1947 : A Visual Documentary'*** was inaugurated by eminent theatre and film actor **Rohini Hattangady** and it was on throughout the duration of the workshop. Besides the workshop participants, it attracted many students, as the visitors book testifies. On the first evening, a music programme by noted Hindustani vocalist **Sandhya Kathavate** titled ***'Sun Ree Sakhi : Women's songs, Women's Voice'*** subtly raised issues of authorship and representation while providing a melodious listening experience. Within the workshop structure too, almost all presentations used audio and visual media: a distinct change from the 'chalk and talk' approach typical of the university ambience.

Three presentations – by **Malavika Karlekar**, **Geraldine Forbes** and **Veena Poonacha** - were about the medium of photographs: how to source , preserve and read them. They covered a range of issues from gendered experiments in recovering the history of a whole era, to that of individual families, and about the pitfalls in assuming that what you see can be interpreted directly. Two papers were on music. **Denise Nuttall** interrogated the classical tradition of tabla which conferred public recognition only on males although female kin of the ustads had their own repository of knowledge and skills in this domain . **Sejal Dand** narrated an experiment by the NGO ANANDI in partnering tribal women in Devgad in creating and recording songs of their experiences of cultural subordination and of empowerment through organizing themselves. She played the songs and explained their content and their making. Artist and film maker **Pushpamala** showed her film *Rashtri Kheer and Desi Salad* and talked about how an innocent family diary with recipes scrawled on it triggered a thought trail in her about the hiatus between, as well as the knitting together of masculine and feminine worlds in the first flush of Indian independence in the 50s.

Concrete experiences of women’s organisations in documenting and archiving - hurdles, pitfalls and hands on (re)solutions - were discussed in the paper by **Mita Parikh** and **Shivani Thaker** of SEWA as well as in the subsequent panel discussion by **Divya Pande** (SPARROW), **Sharada Sathe** (STREE MUKTI SANGHATANA), **Sonal Shukla** (VACHA) and **Hansa Thapliyal** (MAJLIS).

The experiences and perspectives of archiving by organisations not especially focussed on gender were also included. **Arvind Ganachari** described the nitty gritty of ploughing through and gleaning insights from the National and Maharashtra State Archives; **Ratula Dutta** spoke of her work in collaboration with **Indira Chowdhury** in creating an archives for Tata Institute of Fundamental Research; **Amanda Padamsee** and **Vinod Kumar** spoke on the work of Centre for Education and Documentation, which while gender sensitive, has a whole range of concerns. **Neil Sadwelkar** filled in the audience on digitisation and other new technologies, about terminology, techniques, costs, shelf life, and a host of other issues.

Issues and Outcomes

The sessions had lively discussions in which ‘selectivity’ and ‘representation’ featured prominently, as issues whose significance is undiminished even with non conventional sources. Another recurring concern was that of access to technology, its cost , and most importantly, to what purpose it could and should be deployed. The conventional separation of spheres between social scientists/ historians and archivists/technologists got questioned, but it was revealing that at a subterranean level, it sometimes continued to inform assumptions. Given this, it was perhaps inevitable that the workshop did not resolve the above issues in a concerted manner, but ended on a tentative note of having brought together a variety of actors and stakeholders on one platform and triggered a dialogue.

For the organisers , it was gratifying to get feedback from participants that the proceedings were informative, lively and thought provoking; that they had learnt something new; that they had not previously thought of this subject in this manner; that they now felt less intimidated by technology. “I will now look anew at my family photographs and letters” was one comment, which made our day.

Specifically, by way of ‘usable’ outcomes:

1. The IAWS silver jubilee conference is on the broad theme of Women and Knowledge production, and a plenary on retrieving and creating gendered historical knowledge is a definite possibility.
2. The workshop’s approach of mixing ‘cultural programmes’ and ‘business sessions’ in content and format worked well, and furnishes an innovative format for the silver jubilee conference.

Acknowledgements

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Bhavan, the concert space. ICSSR provided the conference space and other related amenities.

The Workshop Report has been prepared by Kamala Ganesh with inputs from Gita Chadha and Unnati Tripathi..