

# Personal Archives for Community Building: Lessons Learned from PG Sindhi Library

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## Abstract

The need for archiving Sindhi literary tradition in India comes from the space of serving the Sindhi community and its literature divided by the partition of India. This region-less regional literature has been facing a lot of challenges. For instance, it has not thrived the way literatures from the other two partitioned territories (Punjab and Bengal) have because Sindhis did not get a land or a province they could call their own in India. It has also been divided by script in the sense that multiple scripts are in use and the practice of reading/writing in Sindhi itself is disappearing (Daswani, 1989). The digital archive project PG Sindhi Library is an attempt to make older books published in the early years of independent India accessible to the Sindhi community and those interested in South Asian Studies as well as to encourage readers to contribute their items to the library, or even build their own archives. This paper shares the archivist's findings or lessons learned from the experience with the larger community of digital humanists working in archiving projects. The objective is also to integrate archival work with that of the researcher and theorise archiving from a practitioner's point of view, given the need to reflect on the unique archival and digital needs of Global South.

Keywords: Sindhi; archiving; Partition of India; minority studies

PG Sindhi Library digital archive is an archive of Sindhi books published in India and as collected by the now deceased Shri Parmanand Ghanshyamdas. Sindhi is a South Asian language spoken in Sindh, Pakistan and the Sindhi diaspora all over the world as it spread to

different countries after the Partition and/or for trade and commerce networks the community was traditionally a part of. This paper is written towards the agenda of documenting the process of its making. However, before the details of the project are shared, it is imperative to draw attention to the context of Sindhi as language and as a community impacted by the Partition of India in 1947.

## 1 The Need for the Archive

The archive, as it stands today, was built because the archive that was originally planned or desired could not be built. The earlier vision was to bring the voices of Sindhi readers together as they talk about their favourite works of Sindhi literature. That archive was a way for this archivist to revive conversations about Sindhi literary tradition in India, given that its death has been mourned L H Ajwani (1962) as early as the first decades of Sindhi community's migration to India from Pakistan. As the archivist's search for Sindhi readers began, it became clearer that the opposite is true: it is not that the literature or the writers who have vanished because it is indeed possible to find Sindhi writers who have been self-publishing their work. What is vanishing is the readership and the audience. Because the archive required Sindhi readers, the archivist needed to contribute to creating reading opportunities.

The Partition of India in 1947 displaced, broadly speaking, three linguistic communities: Bengalis, Punjabis, and Sindhis. While Bengalis and Punjabis found a territory they could call home in India, Sindhis did not. Given that India very soon organised its provinces or regions, "states" as they are called in India (Sarangi, 2010), the fact that Sindhis do not have a state they can call their own poses a unique problem. About 1-2 million Sindhis according to different accounts (Ajwani, 1962; Kothari, 2004) came to India as refugees after their exodus from Sindh (Zamindar, 2007).



Constituting less than half a percent of India's population (Gehani, n.d.), Sindhis are a linguistic minority in India (Bhavnani 2016; Kothari & Thadani 2016). More relevant to the context of the archive being discussed in this article is the point that there are very few Sindhi readers in contemporary India: the language does not have a territory that it can call a space of its own the way other regions in linguistically reorganised states in India do. Therefore, Sindhi is not the language of everyday interactions in official records, commerce, society, and school education. Sindhis scattered to different cities and states in India (Bhavnani 2014) – another reason why spaces such as bookstores or theatres have not survived for readers and enthusiasts of Sindhi literature and culture to feel a sense of belongingness or community. These lacks at the level of structures and community have interfered with the cultivation and growth of Sindhi readership.

Sindhi books themselves are now turning into artefacts that are hard to find. They are housed at a handful of libraries in the country. Examples of such libraries include Lekhraj Aziz Library and Research Centre housed at Sindhu Youth Circle in Ulhasnagar (near Mumbai) and the library at Indian Institute of Sindhology in Adipur, Gujarat (a province in Western part of India). For readers to begin to discover works of Sindhi literature, they need an assortment of books and authors to sample from. Digital collections are a way to overcome those challenges of discovery and access.

While there are a few Sindhi authors whose works are available online by their next generations, the collections centre around individual authors ("Shri AJ Uttam: Sindhi Writer," n.d). It was in this context that the idea of PG Sindhi Library hosted on the website of Sanchaya Foundation came about (Parmanand Ghanshyamdas Sindhi Library 2023). The books

on the website are from the private collection of an enthusiastic reader who taught maths for a living but loved Sindhi books and continued to support the literature and language by buying books. The library is named after him – Parmanand Ghanshyamdas.

Against this background of Sindhi situation in India, what follows are reflections on how the archive invites stimulates diverse engagements with South Asian archiving practices, archive theory in general, and archival practices around minority languages.

## 2 Implications for/from South Asian Archival Projects

South Asia is home to many linguistic ethnicities. Therefore, it becomes a critical zone for experimentation in archiving as projects learn from each other and feed into each other for strategies of growth. A lot of this linguistic diversity is likely to resonate with the condition of the Global South as discussed below. But more immediate to the discussion of South Asia, one could begin by noting three important factors that play a huge role in the design of the archive.

The first is the question of scripts, making Sindhi a critical case study in postcolonial grammatology (Wadhwa 2023). Sindhi has traditionally been written in multiple scripts: Perso-Arabic (that was institutionalised by the British in the 19th century), Devanagari (which was revived in India by the Hindu community after the Partition), Gurmukhi (a script it shares with Punjabi language), Gujarati (because of the ties both Gujarati and Sindhi languages share with Kutchi language), and Roman (because the community is scattered to different parts of the world where they have access only to the Roman script).

In order to remain accessible, PG Sindhi Library was to be accessible in more than one script. The



books in the archive have not been changed: the PDF files are in the same script that they were uploaded in. The metadata about the items is available in three scripts: Devanagari, Perso-Arabic, and Roman. The description, however, is in English. The search for collaborators who can help in transliterating the texts and enable crowdsourced annotations continues. All scripts, except Perso-Arabic, are written from left to right. It is imperative for the meta data for the project to enable a reader-friendly search or exploration experience.

The platform on which the archive is built is Omeka. One has to be quite inventive in terms of designing the space between different descriptors so that the information becomes legible to the visitor to the website.

The second factor that plays a critical role is technology. The archivist may not realise that the workflow needed for languages written from right to left require a different kind of handling from back to front and from right to left. The PDFs on PG Sindhi Library were manually reversed from back to front because the document was not flowing properly for the reader. This step in the workflow reminded me that while digital humanists are mindful that digital technology is not compatible for past and for future given the pace at which upgrades happen in file formats, storage systems, and applications, they must now reckon with the possibility that the digital technology we have is not even compatible for the present. The processes of scanning the books and converting to PDF needed to be adapted to the requirements of Sindhi language. But the same may not strike someone who does not speak or read the language.

The third factor is the use of space. When Parmanand Ghamshyamdas's private library was shared with the archivist, the books themselves

were restricted only to another personal or private space, that is, of the archivist. In keeping with one of the "theses on the archive" published by Pad.ma (Padma 2015), the spirit of archiving should be conceived of as an outward practice that seeks to share and project rather than be treated as a something protected or even insulated from exchange. With the sharing of the library in digital space, it was possible for the archivist to make the books available in the public domain.

However, to work towards the formation of reader communities, the archive, as it stands today, needs a gentler push with the help of book reading sessions or clubs in which reading, recitation, storytelling, and impressionistic discussions of the text and its style get discussed. Indeed, the launch of the archive in May 2023 was also the occasion of a book reading session: not everyone present was familiar with Sindhi. The reading by the archivist and a couple of members from the audience was interwoven with an explanation or translation in Hindi and English.

A digital copy discussed in online meeting space and being annotated digitally on the archive website is what can help navigate the limitations of physical space. What physical infrastructure could not help with might find creative manifestations in digital space. To aspire to Mueller's framing of a digital archive, PG Sindhi Library seeks to "become more a device for conveying and experiencing than of preserving" while inviting contribution from users thus extending the meaning of sharing that is two-way: sharing with community the books from the private collection but also inviting them to share the books they have, should they choose to (Mueller 2017).

### 3 Synergy between Archiving and Theory



In her recent book *Digital Codicology*, Bridget Whearty (2023) makes a case for the inclusion of archivists' inputs in the process of theorisation of texts and data sets because their familiarity with texts and the contexts in which they come to be digitised enriches a theorist's understanding of the text. As she notes, the critical work of archiving is not about the repetitive meaningless turning of pages for even the repetitiveness produces a sense of intimacy with the text that a scholar accessing a text as a finished product may have no access to. With PG Sindhi Library, this archivist suggests another nuance to Whearty's suggestion and argues for archival work as being seen as scholarship in itself.

Building PG Sindhi Library has helped the archivist develop individual studies of early history of Sindhi literature in India and the history of debates around Sindhi script in India, among other themes. Working with archives has brought up a lot of thematic concerns that have easily lent themselves to be framed as research questions. For scholarship in the Global South, this difference is of great importance: a scholar cannot afford to go to the archive in search of answers to questions all the time; one has to also create archives and then let questions emerge from them. In the former approach, the archive is the source or the answer. In the latter approach, the archive is an end to further ends. The former situation lends itself very easily to certain kinds of silences because archives cannot be held responsible for generating answers. However, they can be explored as different ways of framing questions by organising the files and items differently. For PG Sindhi Library, what started as an assortment of books has become a good sample of investigation into book history and history of entrepreneurship considering the rich information that the archive provides about

these facets of Sindhi culture and community history during the early years after the Partition.

Lest these approaches be conflated with curatorial approaches, one must note that the argument being made here is about curation (and thereby praxis) itself as theory. In this approach, curation is not an introductory note to the themes but a commitment to explore the theme to its fullest. For instance, with planned further study of advertising that the books and magazines in the collection contain, one archive multiplies into several archives. The books speak of the publishing scene and the entrepreneurship scene in the advertising they contain. Thus, the archive speaks to literary sensibilities and also to sociological inquiry. In the niche of South Asian Studies, the coming together of multiple lenses for scholarship (apart from being of use to non-scholarly readers) is an opportunity to ask rooted questions of institutions and practices.

Especially enriching in the making of the archive was the exercise of category creation to make sense of texts and identify them as subcollections. For instance, there were texts that fit into fiction as well as translation. Magazines could have easily fit into poetry as well as fiction and short story but were ultimately left alone as magazines because these also deserved to have an identity of their own.

#### **4 Working with Challenges of Minority Languages**

The people who volunteered to help with setting up the PG Sindhi Library were not from Sindhi community. Indeed, most of the work was done in Southern India, a region where Sindhis are not even heard of as a community or Sindhi as a language. While a team of people who work with books in Kannada language scanned the books, the associate who worked extensively on the website was conversant with Telugu and



English, but not Sindhi. The team that helped record the meta data such as author and title of the books was familiar with Gurmukhi/Punjabi but also knew Sindhi via Urdu. Their work has been acknowledged on the website in the spirit of adhering to archiving ethics (Murray 2017). Because they understood the challenges that Indian languages face when it comes to the creation and maintenance of digital resources, they did their best. In this sense, PG Sindhi Library is a typical case of working with limited resources rather than chasing the goal of accuracy and feature-richness (such as annotation or transcription).

In the process of scanning and filing, some books that did not have covers got mixed up with other books and scanned as a single item. Some pages that came loose still hang around as loose documents as mysterious pieces. A lot of the items in the archive fall under the “Unknown” category because the cover pages of these books are lost. That unknown item can be a part of a rich genre specific to that literary tradition or symbolic of something shared by many languages. But there may not be any way to know unless a familiar reader discovers the item and is willing to share something about it.

The challenges of spelling of the meta data in the archive revolve around discoverability by search engines. What other users may search for may not connect strongly with the individual item pages on archives. The kind of metrics that need to be set to determine the usage of PG Sindhi Library has been a very tricky decision for the archivist and the well-wishers of the project to make. Some experts have suggested that the access should be tied to a login feature so that admin can keep track of the details of users and visits. This might help in reaching out to users for the next phase of opening up the archive for annotations from readers. These are questions fundamental to growth and engagement of the

archive and will need to be addressed soon. However, the pursuit of these milestones, so to speak, requires a sense of caution: the archive should not turn into something technical (in the sense of becoming overwhelmed by technology and by the technicality the way official records tend to be). On the contrary, such archives that draw on personal records might be better off being left as personal, unofficial, and non-technical archives to retain an openness to anyone who is curious enough to understand what is *not* covered by official archives and deserve a space for their “will to archive” that the (colonial) state usually assumes (Thirumal and Kommaraju 2018). The state of Sindhi language and literature might reveal itself differently in records of publishing industry or in institutional archives such as the kind available with Sahitya Akademi, one of the early institutions to support the cause of Sindhi language in India. National, state and institutional archives have traditionally been characterised by questions of governance (Prasad 1978, Gautam 2013) that an archive such as PG Sindhi Library can perhaps afford to stay out of. In a way, it is “anarchival” (Furlus and Giannetti 2014) that Wolfgang Ernst (2004, 2016) invokes with all the constraints of an official archive as a read-only memory that simply is and cannot be experimented with.

The flip side is that an archive seen as personal may not receive any funding for its development, a constant source of conflict within state institutions (Seeger & Chaudhuri 2004) and also caught in the debates around national and post-national nature of contemporary practices of archiving (Rosenzweig 2003). However, it can receive community support from larger archiving organisations. PG Sindhi Library is hosted on the space of Sanchaya Foundation which works on books and publishing in quite a few Indian



languages (Sanchaya 2010). The challenges and possible ways to tackle them, as put forth by Grace Koch (2004), still resonate with such archives and their intensity increases manifold. For instance, in line with copyright issues that Koch mentions, one must note that while the publishers of the books on PG Sindhi Library do not exist anymore, the successors of some authors who have set up websites for the individual authors, may object to the uploading of their ancestors' books on the archive. The personal archive that PG Sindhi Library is, in the sense of being a document that was collected and read by a Sindhi, may, should the lens of copyright infringement get raised, get framed as a platform built out of other people's creations. An even larger question is: would this archive be seen as sharing the ethos of a library, an institution that has a history of being poorly funded and ignored even within the study of library science (Bhatt 2009), or conflated with piracy?

The most significant implications that such an archive has for the process of archiving in the minority languages is the experimentation with the form of archiving. That is, situated as personal archives (in relation to the state archive which, in turn, is rooted in the colonial practices of archiving), PG Sindhi Library turns to personal histories as sources of memory, an idea eloquently theorised by Zimu-Biyela (2022), Ngoepe (2019) and Harris (2011). The communities and other sources that have conventionally not been at the centre of sources of memory-making find space here. As mentioned above, what PG Sindhi Library reveals about what was liked and bought as leisurely reading in Sindhi is not readily available in the archive of Sahitya Akademi.

## 5 Conclusion

One book at a time, as enjoyed by a Sindhi gentleman who wanted to read whatever was currently being published, grew into a distinct collection. Similarly, one book at a time was also how this archivist began her journey in reading Sindhi written in Perso-Arabic script. The archive, for as long as it is (a)live, is a precious resource that might lead me to the actual project of finding Sindhi readers. As a medium of using personal artefacts to connect to community history, it might serve as a model to be further improved and shared.

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