

Rakesh Mohan: Reserve Bank of India archives – some reflections and the way forward

Inaugural address by Dr Rakesh Mohan, Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, at the Silver Jubilee Inaugural Function of the Reserve Bank of India Archives, Pune, 29 September 2006.

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It is a real pleasure to be here today on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee Inaugural Function of the Reserve Bank of India Archives (RBIA), earlier known as the Central Records and Documentation Centre (CRDC). The Reserve Bank of India established its Central Archives on August 24, 1981 with twin objectives to serve as (i) repository of non-current permanent records and (ii) the Central Archives of the Reserve Bank of India for research purposes. I am pleased to inform you that the RBI was one of the few organisations to have a corporate archive in the 1980s. It is a tangible sign of our active interest in archives in general and our archival heritage in particular.

This past year has been an important year for the Reserve Bank in terms of historic milestones. The Third Volume of its History, covering the period 1967-1981 was released by the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, also our former Governor, on March 18, 2006. Since the Reserve Bank also completed 70 years of its existence in 2005, our annual publication the [Report on Currency and Finance 2004-05](#) reviewed the Reserve Bank's evolution as a Central Bank as its theme. But with all these milestones, we should not merely be stuck in the past. We should use these occasions to look ahead as well. In reviewing our own evolution as a Central Bank, we also had occasion to look into the evolution of central banking in general. The general image of central banks is that of conservative, stodgy, rigid institutions. It therefore came as a surprise to us that the Reserve Bank, along with other central banks, has been changing quite significantly in practice and function as the economic conditions and needs have changed over time. There has been a continuous process of change. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we lay appropriate emphasis on the presentation of our archives, so that all these changes are well documented and available for interpretation by future historians.

Archive is not a new concept. Archives constitute the memory of people and organisation and collectively that of the world. Archives help in forming our destiny to come together like individual parts of a musical score that create the symphony of history, past journeys which reveal our nature and origin and provide understanding of the past to illuminate the future. It is reported that, as early as the 5th – 4th centuries BC, the Athenians kept valuable documents in the temple of the mother of the Gods, known as, 'Metroon'. A great number of documents are said to have been kept in the temple: treaties, laws, minutes of the assembly, statements of the political philosopher Socrates in his own hand, plays of Sophocles and Euripides, list of victors in Olympic Games, and the life. In Ancient India the records were engraved as edicts as well as kept in Buddhist monasteries. Ancient archives are usually literally cast in stone. Now we etch them on microfilm. We hope that these will last as long as the stone edicts. And, perhaps, people 2000 years from now will refer to the RBI archives as a temple!

But Archives are not only about long term memory about history and culture. Archivists are also of immediate help to their organisations in ensuring proper management and presentation of information and devising policies for systematic destruction of records that are of no value. Archives see to it that the organisation keeps a corporate memory, and preserves only valuable records that become manageable, retrievable and usable. In doing so the Archives help to ensure better decision making and promote proper accountability. Thus, Archives contribute to efficiency and economy in their own administration while nurturing the collective memory without which people, research scholars, administrators and organisations would otherwise grope in the dark of amnesia.

It is the records that tell us about our past and guide us for the future. Without records, past mistakes would be no longer lessons for the future. Citizens would not have any source material for writing past history. Indeed, without records, our sense of continuity as a people would be jeopardised. A nation must believe in three things: it must believe in the past; it must believe in the future; it must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people to learn from the past so to gain judgement in creating their own future.

Our records are created for business purposes but with passage of time these records become the documentary heritage of the Bank. Our heritage goes back to 1935. With our current records and those that we have inherited, we have approximately 35,143 records in the custody of our archives. These records include files, registers, photographs, press-clippings, publications and CDs. Some of

the important documents include letters from Sir Osborne Smith, first Governor of RBI to Sir J.B. Taylor, first Deputy Governor (1935) on authorising the latter to preside over the meetings of the Committee of Central Board (CCB) during his tour to London; Now this instruction is contained in a standing CCB resolution recorded whenever a new Deputy Governor is appointed. There is another letter from Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India, to Shri C.D. Deshmukh, first Indian Governor of RBI, requesting him to send an analytical report on the deteriorating economic condition and suggest remedies. We now do a regular economic assessment every quarter along with the quarterly monetary policy statements. We also send a weekly report to the Prime Minister's office as a routine. The records include the instructions for elimination of pies from the banking accounts and cheques (1945); devaluation of Indian rupee and the new parity rate with foreign currencies (1966); division of assets between India and Pakistan on the partition of India, among others.

To facilitate research on the RBI and banking, RBIA also has an archival library wherein all publications brought out by the RBI and other sister organisations are available. RBIA is not only preserving these records but also making them available for research purposes. According to the Reserve Bank of India Archives Historical Research Rules (2001) the non-current records which are more than 30 years old are open for research purposes. Access to records is open to students, research scholars and members of the staff of the Reserve Bank of India and other banks. I hope that we become more pro-active in the usage of these archives for scholars' purposes. We have decided to devote significant resources for the maintenance of RBI Archives. They should therefore be used more regularly by schools than they are currently. May I urge the Archives managers and RBI administration to give special consideration on how the Archives can be used better? One idea could be the institution of scholarships and fellowships for students and researchers for this purpose.

A new technological development available to us now is the possibility of archiving oral histories of key participants in policy developments in both digital audio and video form. Being deeply conscious of the need to use the past to inform the future, I am glad to inform you that the Reserve Bank has initiated a process of making such recordings by interviewing some key policy makers in both the Reserve Bank and the Government who were continue in the 1980s and 1990s. As this project is completed, this will be a new form of archive that will be available for future historians.

I understand that the Reserve Bank of India Archives has been formulating and implementing scientific procedures and guidelines for sharing, preserving and utilising our documentary heritage. The first and foremost requirement for such a programme to be successful is that it should be based on sound and result oriented professionalism. I feel that all concerned must ensure professionalism in their work of keeping archives. There are three aspects to the issue of proper up-keep of archives: (i) the physical preservation of the valuable records; (2) their proper organisation so that they may be easily retrieved and consulted; and (3) prevention of their improper use.

Physical preservation of its record holdings based on the scientific principle is one of the priority areas of emphasis in of the Reserve Bank of India Archives. Some new initiatives in the scientific preservation of paper records have been undertaken by RBI Archives. These include fumigation and deacidification of records. If the paper is stained, it is cleaned; if torn, it is repaired; if weakened, it is reinforced, and finally loose papers are bound properly. I am happy to note that through scientific means efforts are being made to preserve the heritage of the Reserve Bank of India for future generations.

All of us assembled here intensely feel and experience that knowledge is essential to understanding and interpreting what is going on. There is also increasing understanding that right to information is as fundamental as any other fundamental democratic right. The main constituent of knowledge being information, we are to be cautiously diligent in preserving information through compatible technological means. Archival contents and information shall have to be preserved through either microfilming or digital means thus preserving our archival heritage. I am happy to inform you that the Reserve Bank of India Archives has taken up an ambitious project of microfilming and scanning of its records as a disaster management programme and as well as to have electronic document storage and retrieval system for instantaneous access.

In spite of rapid developments in information technology, the basic involvement of human beings in the process of information generation in files and records cannot be entirely ruled out. To facilitate record management activities, the Reserve Bank of India has established Record Rooms in all its Central Office Departments and the Regional Offices. Efforts are being made to train the staff deployed in the Record Rooms so as to enable them to up-keep records properly. We must understand that slipshod record management activities may cause loss, dispersal and dilution of information content of a file

which may in the long run may prove detrimental to the interest of the Bank. Hemmed in by local, national and global network we cannot ignore and neglect the records management activities – the basic feeder to all information systems.

I am happy to share with you that the Reserve Bank of India Archives has been playing a proactive role in streamlining records management in the Bank by providing on the spot advice on records management to the Offices, providing professional expertise in appraisal and review of non-current records. I firmly believe that for success of any records management programme, participation and efforts at all levels are required. Though no one can go back and make a brand new start but any one can start from now and make a brand new ending.

After the enactment of the Right to Information Act (RTIA) we, at the Reserve Bank of India have welcomed it with enthusiasm. As other central banks, we strive to be transparent in our work and show that communication is essential to our work. However, as our Chief Public Information Officer (CPIO) will confirm, some of our departments sometimes have difficulty in retrieving information that is asked for. We therefore need better documentation and retrieval systems. This has become even more important with computerisation. I would like to request the RBIA, in consultation with our Administration to consider appointing a group to look afresh into our documentation procedure in light of the new developments.

While talking about professionalism we cannot forget the incredible progress that has been made in the area of information technology in the recent times. Computers have revolutionised the traditional concept of storage and retrieval of records. Progressive research in miniaturisation has made it possible to reduce vast quantities of records on a few computer chips making storage and retrieval of data exceedingly easy and the daunting shelves of records have finally become user friendly. The pace with which we are creating new records is unprecedented in the history of mankind, but fortunately we have also given to ourselves the ability to handle and manipulate this ever increasing corpus of records for our benefit. In the Reserve Bank of India we have to equip ourselves with these skills so that we are not only able to preserve those valuable records which have been handed-over to us from the past but also we are able to process and streamline the infinite number of records we generate. When I speak of professionalism I mean this very skill, which must be acquired by our Archives and Information Technology specialists if they want to cope up with the demands of future. A Central Bank is a giant information processing machine. Our website bears testimony to this as does our Central Database Management System (CDBMS). A great deal of information is available in our website, as in other central bank websites: circulars, policy statements, reports, market information, economic data and the like, the CDBMS is a data warehouse already available to the public. The website is expanding almost every day by leaps and bounds.

Distinguished bankers, academicians, scholars and archivists would agree with me that establishing physical, administrative and intellectual control over our documentary heritage is the most challenging job because of sheer variety of media on which records are stored which includes paper, microfilms, CD's, DVD's, magnetic tapes, floppies, etc. It is a really challenging job to integrate all information within an organisation on various media and store and retrieve the information when required. At present, the RBIA is preserving, storing and providing access to paper based records but in future all computer generated records would also have to be preserved and transferred to Archives. In this connection it may be noted that there is pertinent need to establish systems and procedures for creation, maintenance, transfer and migration of all records of vital importance created by various offices and departments of the Reserve Bank of India in electronic form to be preserved for administrative, evidential and historical purposes.

I have just now mentioned that professionalism is indispensable for any successful archival management programme - so are functional archival building, shelving systems and disaster management programmes. As you are aware, properly built archival buildings alone can facilitate protection of records of national importance and historical value from the vagaries of weather and fire. The Reserve Bank of India Archives has four large size records rooms each measuring about 3,800 square feet. The records are kept in centrally air-conditioned rooms. The building is well equipped with fire fighting equipment like smoke detectors with alarm alert system and fire extinguishers. The digital Access Control System is being installed in the record rooms to prevent unauthorised entry. Recently, Reserve Bank of India Archives has installed a Compactus Shelving System which protects records from dust and enables considerable saving of space. Overall it can be said that records are kept in ambient storage conditions in order to increase their longevity.

I am pleased to share with you that for proper development and to meet the challenges of future the Reserve Bank of India Archives has chalked out Future Plan for 2006 – 2011.

Although the Reserve Bank of India has systems and procedures for records management in place but a need for a proper Archival Policy has always been felt. Recently, the Committee of the Central Board of RBI has also emphasised the need for clear-cut Archival Policy of the Bank. This policy would enumerate the sound records management practices followed in the Bank in respect of creation and preservation of records, preservation schedule, maintenance of records, weeding and appraisal of records and transfer of non-current permanent records to the RBIA. This policy would, no doubt, try to streamline the records management systems in the Bank.

It has been our experience that in some of the Central Office Departments and the Regional Offices, records management is not being accorded due priority resulting in non-transfer of permanent records to the RBIA. The geometrical growth of records puts a limitation on space that can be provided for storing them and on funds that could be made available for their proper maintenance and on servicing personnel required for their care and processing. In view of this, RBIA will now initiate action on appraisal or review of non-current records in the custody of the Central Office Departments and Regional Offices in consultation with the creating agencies.

We all are aware of the challenges posed by electronic records. The disappearance of physical entity of record is one of the most intriguing and fascinating aspects of digital era. The present generation of Archivists and Record Managers have a challenging job to make these records available whenever required. RBIA would shortly initiate steps for digitisation of records in its custody. At present vital records in electronic form are kept at various locations in decentralised form and it is felt that if appropriate steps are not taken in this direction these records would 'fade away' from the memory of the Bank. It is, therefore, essential that guidelines in this regard are formulated and scrupulously implemented.

I am happy to inform you that during the Silver Jubilee Year a number of initiatives are being taken by RBIA to enhance its image and utility. A Currency Display Unit would be added in the RBIA. The currency display and archival exhibition would be open to visitors so as to make people aware of the role of RBI in country's economy and monetary policy. Last but not the least, RBIA would make a Disaster Preparedness and Reaction Plan. Emphasis should be placed on the need for fast and efficient reaction to even small incident as they have potential to grow into something bigger if not contained. I am sure, when ready, the plan would provide RBIA with guidelines to combat the emergency efficiently and effectively.

Before I end, I would like to emphasise the urgent need for adopting proactive approach in streamlining records management in the Bank. With the enactment of Right to Information Act (2005) the records management system needs closer look so that systems are evolved for instantaneous storage and retrieval of information for dissemination purposes. I once again congratulate RBIA and its staff on Silver Jubilee and hope that they would be able to tackle future challenges efficiently and effectively.

Thank you.