

The Persistence of Memory: Building Archives of ‘Institutional Memory’ at Ambedkar University Delhi

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Institutions of higher education in post-independence India were developed as secular entities, with a tendency to become more socially inclusive,¹ providing for a distinctive kind of interaction between generations. The social milieu and gender, caste and class disparities do not disappear, but come to be questioned in such settings.² While a university’s interests and identities are structured to encourage collective experiences and memories of inhabiting campus spaces, they also function as a site of knowledge transmission and cultural production, controlling the variant interpretations of the ways in which the institution’s past is perceived. To review the institutionalized cultural production that gives collective memories long term meaning, this paper traces the role of multimedia memory archives within a university community, and the persistence of varied imaginations of the university through the case of the Institutional Memory initiative at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD).

The idea of memory persistence in computer science refers to a state in which memory outlives the process that created it, referring to data elements that are found to be accessible even in the afterlives of structures that created them. An extension of this understanding can be applied in the case of institutional memories, guided by a multidimensional approach to understand the malleable histories, also referred to as ‘social memory studies’.³ Collective memory is said to be sustained through a continuous production of representational forms, particularly in the media age, aiding a flow of memories. Young (1993) introduced the notion of ‘collected memory’, marking memory’s inherently fragmented character, manifesting itself in media objects, memorials and museums.⁴ To discern institutionalized memories and their dissemination, we must also analyse the cognitive processes

that produce past-defining schemata⁵, the interaction between culturally related individuals and the interactions between individuals and institutional forms themselves.

Established in 2008, the foundational work of planning and designing Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University was conducted through consultative meetings with scholars, administrators and experts in the field. The drafted vision for the university reflected a commitment towards interdisciplinarity, innovative administrative and academic processes⁶—through new pedagogies, concurrent appointment of faculty, fee-waivers and earn-while-you-learn schemes, choice-based credit system, cumulative student assessments, amongst other initiatives. University’s various schools, centres and administrative divisions took shape on the first campus at Dwarka since 2010, expanded after its shift to Kashmere Gate campus in 2012, and escalated the ongoing growth in employees, student strength and academic range after the opening of Karampura and Lodhi Road campuses since 2016 and 2017. The initial sensibilities and expectations of board of advisors and administrators are manifested in reports, minutes of meetings, project proposals, pedagogical outlines, recruitment choices, email threads, event posters, photographs and intangible memories. In the spirit of new beginnings, schools and divisions developed their structures, staff, curriculum and projects. Sub-cultures around students and faculty started forming, each school started tending towards certain themes. Festival formats and new modes of collectivizing were developing. Societies, sports committees were forming partly with student initiative and partly with institutional facilitation. To keep a pool of new members of a new university in tune with founding ideals, self-reflection and discursive institution building strategies were encouraged.

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Audio-visual documentation of collective institution building processes were initiated during the initial years of the University itself, when all academic and administrative activities were moving towards structuration and even the experiences of carrying out routine administrative tasks reflect an organisational logic. In this context, experiences are different based on attributes of class, gender, caste, comfort with the English language or even a person's position in the University whether they are students, teaching staff or short-term project assistants. The need for recording aspects and experiences of the ever-changing organisation logic and its multiplicities was considered the starting point for the Ambedkar University Delhi Institutional Memory (AUDIM) initiative, and the collaborative processes through which memories of University building and functioning have been recorded, indicate a trend towards auto-ethnographic methodologies. While auto-ethnography itself is not a definitive framework, it provides the Institutional Memory initiative with a set of qualitative research methods involving self-observation and reflexive investigation, as used in ethnographic studies.⁷

DOCUMENTING COLLECTIVE INSTITUTION BUILDING MEMORIES

Officially approved in 2012, the AUD Institutional Memory Project proposed to preserve memories of the growth, expansion and identity-building processes of an institution through a multimedia collection of oral histories, digital records and audio-visual documentation. Starting with a research assistant and faculty advisor to oversee the activities, the initiative grew to involve cooperation from students, alumni, staff and faculty members, who have recorded memories of their experience at the University; stories of origin and views on its gradual growth and expansion, even personal grievances and candid opinions on functioning. The initiative was imagined as an autonomous and continuous 'project' and was positioned in Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK) since the project's aims and objectives were congruent with the Centre's research methodologies.

During AUD's formative years, the students and faculty created spaces for exchanges and discussions around fee structures, student welfare, medium of instruction and pedagogical methodologies and other concerns at a budding University. Many of these exchanges have been recorded – through group email threads, audio-video recordings of academic events and the 'dream sessions' about the University future, meetings of the first student group 'Forum by Students', creation of an AUD Faculty Association, student productions and extra-curricular activities, first impressions of the university, changing

university organograms, admission prospectuses, estate plans, performances and exhibitions, and other ephemera. While the project served several functional purposes, such as contributing photographs to the annual report, convocation and other institutional exhibits, its significant role lay in being a documentation node for the university, a quasi-student's centre, that developed its character only as cohorts took interest in the practice of documentation.

An Institutional Repository (IR) in a contemporary University is typically a digital archive where the University community's intellectual work is made available for long term use, thus influencing the "full cycle of scholarly communication on campus, from research through publication, collection, and preservation"⁸ and through an organisational commitment to the "stewardship of access and distribution of digital materials".⁹ In the AUDIM model, the aspect of memory documentation was also given primacy in addition to scholarly work, and incorporated from institutional repository models in universities elsewhere. The project development included identifying best practices in digital documentation, archiving and database management for the university through standardised metadata schema for archival descriptions¹⁰ and structures for collecting and disseminating the digital contents of the University's memory.

The spade work of building memory sources was initiated through the help of staff and students. Participation came from different quarters and the undergraduate course on 'Digital Storytelling' conducted by the CCK also facilitated an inflow of interested students. Once the framework with scope for conceptual additions was drawn out, the project steered towards storytelling through videos, and the sanctioned video equipment were utilized to record events and interviews. As a result, the documentation between academic years 2012-2013 and 2017-2018 is rich with photographs and video footage that got categorized into: Classrooms; Academic Events; Sports and Culture; University Organisation and Development; Student Initiatives (political, social and cultural cooperation between students); Life on Campus; Interviews/Oral narratives; Daily Diaries (recordkeeping through group email threads, social media exchanges, and observations).

What also got recorded was the AUD community's responses to the presence of a camera in their midst. The initial reactions were mixed—curiosity and eager participation from the undergraduate students, scepticism of the post-graduate students, confusion of staff, guards and sanitation workers, the apprehension of administrators and the encouragement of the faculty and senior management. With campus expansion, documentation methodologies required consistent and reliable systems to administer the project staff and student support for archiving tasks such as

cataloguing, transcribing and logging of interviews.

Curation, use, circulation and meaning-making of this collection has been encouraged amongst student cohorts. Access to talks is directed through a Youtube channel, AUDIM Project, or on-site access. An Audio-Visual (AV) Team had been formed to organise AV workshops for capacity building amongst students. In 2015, an alumnus from the MA batch developed the idea for an Institutional Memory Festival in consultation with the project staff. The student-led walkthrough and subsequent festival, 'Playback', used space specific anecdotes about histories of the building and environs, campus cultures to revisit AUD's past years. The annual festival became a culmination point for students across cohorts to conduct interviews and represent campus narratives through short films¹¹, photo exhibitions and participation. Yet, there is an absence of integrated efforts to incentivize students' involvement in documentation. The University's ongoing schemes such as earn-while-you-learn¹² have contributed to retaining student support but are contingent on limited project funds. Cultures of self-archiving seems to have seeped in intangible ways nonetheless. Contributions to the documentation process have been varied but consistent from the AUD community and voluntarism has been hugely responsible for sourcing bulk of the audio-visual data. Capturing behind-the-scenes, *vox-populi* and student reactions to ongoing events along with retrospective annotation of the photographs adds layers to existing metadata, thus contributing to the auto-ethnographic agenda of memory documentation.

METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS AND OTHER CHALLENGES

Proliferation of digital libraries and open source database management systems have been instrumental in developing and customizing institutional repositories for more than a decade now. Constituted in 2005, the National Knowledge Commission strongly advocated open access to public-funded research.¹³ In the same year, University Grants Commission developed a policy document on building University-level Institutional Digital Repository in India to facilitate access for student research and other intellectual outputs.¹⁴ Open access to academic research facilitated by agencies such as DELNET and INFLIBNET has aided in modernizing libraries and institutional repositories. At the same time, Institutional Repository initiatives in India have stayed limited to being technical and technologically-enabled spaces for the university community. Experiential or anecdotal narratives of a university community are seldom included with records of archival importance. Although exceptions exist, institutional repositories in general "are not yet based on research data as far as policy

issues, institute-specific subjectivities, and standards are concerned."¹⁵

Pervasive technologies and access to documentation tools and recording devices have presented an array of opportunities for decentralised documentation. The balance of both project documentation and community sourcing will be important for the project to perennially develop in relevance with changes in character and structure, with an ability to respond to institutional needs. Public opinion and access to phone camera, internet and social media will ensure that people's narratives and collective memories around events and people will persist and circulate – even without the patronage to institutional memory initiatives.

There evidently exists an interplay within institutional narratives and the markers of collaborative cultures, particularly evident through unofficial records, audio-visual artefacts and social interactions. During the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) visit in 2014, the University space was revamped and students from School of Culture and Creative Expressions illustrated campus walls with graffiti, one of which was whitewashed a day short of the NAAC visit. The University received highest accreditation but the events leading upto it also raised important disagreements between students, faculty and administration on freedom of expression. Not all the debates, discussions and exchanges can be documented, but some of these conversations present in group emails, social media and interviews have been retained in IM. The default process in building memory narratives of the institution from within is equally a consequence, as much as an agenda of the institutional memory initiative.

Making room for student scepticism and their various critiques and negotiations with the inherent power structures could assist in moving away from essentialist tendencies, that many such projects are susceptible to. Cross-sectional community-led documentation can act as an effective counter to officially sanctioned documentation, offering counter-narratives. The formation of the Student Council in April 2016 initiated in accordance with the Lyngdoh Committee recommendations was an occasion for student groups to articulate their issues with the administration's conceptualisation of a representative body. Despite several discussions, general body meetings and administrative interventions, a few student groups chose to boycott the elections and protest the proceedings and their dissenting voices found space in the institutional memory collection.

The multiplicities of memory narratives also depend on access and accessibility to equipment and to the contents of the institutional memory collection. At AUD, the basic set of rules on booking and use of equipment apply to all

members of the University. Students issuing the camera for their field work are equally entitled to access contents, as also members of the non-teaching staff. So far, access to contents of the collection for reference or duplication is unrestricted for the University community. Access controls pertain primarily to sensitive data, for instance, the annual Psychoanalysis conference.

Milestones like opening of new campuses do find coverage in the collection through limited recordings of official events, inaugural meetings and student festivals. However, the ground work in building a campus culture, negotiations between faculty and administration, the particularities in academic engagements or even the absence of an institutional memory unit to provide documentation assistance in Karampura and Lodhi Road campuses have been under-represented so far. Such insights are only revealed through interviews and collectively-source documentation of life on campus which requires a persistent critical evaluation of the modes and methods of building an institutional memory. Manoff (2015) urges institutions to be attuned to listening in to ‘archival silences’ and contends that digital archives are techno-cultural artefacts and digital technologies introduce a variety of material, social and technological questions of archival access and they “vastly expand the possibilities for both creating and redressing archival silence.” She refers to a certain entanglement of matter and meaning; content and device, human and machine elements that condition “intentions of document creators, the professional practices of librarians and archivists, the structure of archival institutions and the properties of the materials used in the production of digital infrastructure”.¹⁶

The lack of a cross sectional representation of opinions within academic spaces can be attributed to several factors, including resource readiness of the project, differing levels of student voluntarism, organisational bias, and anxieties around misuse of memory documents. Studies in collective social memory have analysed the experiences of information gathering and retaining in groups, the memory deficits and collaborative inhibition that both groups and individuals experience. Without due weightage to the gaps in institutional histories, the exercise of AUDIM becomes selective amnesia and nostalgia and emulates the very instrumental modes of institutional repository building that it currently seeks to criticize.

LIFE AND AFTER LIFE OF RECORDS

Social identities are often carved out of constructed narratives and traditions created to provide members with a sense of community. Pierre Nora reflects on the tendency of groups to manipulate construction of the past,

commemorate, memorialize, forget, omit, eliminate and participate in the phenomenon of ‘collective amnesia’. He points to shifting patterns of communities from the *milieux de mémoire* (worlds of memory) to *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory).¹⁷ Memorialisation of select events and happenings leads to persistence of certain narratives around University histories. Yet, they remain fluid and are constantly guided by inflows of new content, annotations and additions to older content. Place markers of memory are as accidental as they are orchestrated, the ruins of Dara Shikoh Library at Kashmere Gate campus offer one such example. Even though a monument situated in particular time and memory, its space is nevertheless a site of multiple memories. The institution and the campus community’s relationship with the archaeological building is thus varied, from being a site of debate, dissent, and deviance to the gardener’s extended nursery. However, the space encompasses sub-cultures and temporal shifts that act as significant memory triggers in student interviews.

Some of these perspectives have steered documentation efforts towards an anthropology of the university. Abhijit Guha (2010) of Vidyasagar University has attempted to elucidate the tense relationship of the university with its own neighbours since its setting up, and its’ gradual deviation from initial objectives thus tying together the multiple narratives emerging within and outside it’s social, political and cultural context.¹⁸ Student groups at AUD such as Progressive and Democratic Student Community (PDSC) have sustained discussions around English being the only medium of instruction and its implication on social justice since 2013. In effect, these student groups challenge the established narratives of the University as an ‘inclusive and non-hierarchical’ space and throw light on inconsistencies within and outside the classroom, thereby preventing a linear narrative of the University’s character. The vibrancy of student movements on campus is evident in the case of JNU where the faculty and students came together to register their protest through the JNU Nationalism lectures.¹⁹ The JNU Nationalism lectures are circulated through social media but cannot be found on one single webpage of the University. Alternative web pages like Dalit Camera and the Dalit Bahujan Adivasi collective in AUD have utilised audio-visual documentation and social media solidarities to highlight caste-based student discrimination on campus spaces.²⁰ The AUDIM, as it is defined currently, provides scope for such student discussions and dissent to be included in the repository and register its archival significance through decentralising and populating chronicles about the University.

The ever-changing nature and texture of memory calls for a theory of cultural transmission that helps us understand history not only chronologically, but as an

active process of meaning-making through time, “the ongoing work of reconstructive imagination” or mnemo history.²¹ It’s characterisation is more that the transmission of information, or as an assemblage of facts.²² Memories related to institutions will continue to exist in the media, social interactions, official documents and other public mediums while simultaneously creating public narratives about the university, whether institutions exert influence over these narratives or not. Through an institutionalized memory documentation, the attempt is to aggregate the varied dimensions of collectively held memories and experiences. The intrinsic properties of objects of the past influence their power and persistence in subsequent institutional narratives, but they also offer ground for interpretation, construction, reconstruction and contention of established narratives.²³ These contextual and contingent memories are more likely to persist in collective memory than grand institutional histories.

NOTES

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