

From the Archives

National Workshop on Preserving our Scientific Heritage

The Indian Institute of Astrophysics, the Indian Institute of Science and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research jointly organized a National Workshop on the topic 'Preserving Our Scientific Heritage' in IIA, Bangalore on January 21-22, 2008. This workshop was deemed timely as there has been a surge of interest in discovering and collecting historical material on science and scientists in India. Members of the organizing committee were drawn from the three premier institutes. The scientific programme was carefully planned. It included various aspects of preservation and conservation techniques used in preserving the scientific contents buried in many of our organizations. The aim of preventive conservation is to create a favourable condition, minimizing decay, and to avoid unnecessary remedial treatments, and thus prolonging the life span of rare materials. Since the topic of preservation is seldom talked about in our country, the workshop was organized to sensitise our policy makers and the custodians of our heritage (many of whom participated in the workshop), the importance of initiating the process of safeguarding our archival material immediately.

Diverse areas like collection policies, preservation and conservation issues, case studies of established archives in India and perspectives of the users, were addressed in the scientific programme. Participants came from government scientific organizations, the corporate world and universities and academic institutions. The speakers were experts in their respective fields. The keynote address was delivered by Ross Bassette, an historian and a recognized expert on history of science and technology, from the North Carolina State University in Raleigh. In his address, Professor Bassett expressed his concern at the lack of attention paid to creating archives in general and spoke on issues related to setting them up in India and the importance of safeguarding India's history.



Dr. Ross Bassett, delivering the keynote address during the workshop

Presentations on the first day focused on the current collection policies formulated by the existing archives in the country. It turns out that this varies from one individual archive to the other. Hence it was emphasized that a collection policy should be drawn out at the initial stage of setting up any archive and that it should be in line with a comprehensive planning policy. It is also necessary to make the policy visible to the users of the archives both within and outside the organizations. In the afternoon, there were presentations of seven case studies of science archives in the country. As many of these archives belong to organizations which have completed important milestones over the past two centuries, it was

interesting to note that the potential to create the awareness in preserving the heritage exists in the country and the great variety of scientific contents which need immediate attention for posterity.



Session on Collection Policy – panel of speakers

In the evening, a special talk was delivered by Professor P. Balaram, Director of the Indian Institute of Science, on the topic 'Private philanthropy and public good – the early history of the Indian Institute of Science'. This session was organized in the Indian Institute of Science Faculty Hall. It attracted a huge audience. Professor Balaram traced the main events that led to the birth of IISc, starting from the 1890's. He highlighted the role of a few individuals like Swami Vivekananda and Shri Burjoji Padshah who were instrumental in realizing Shri J. N. Tata's dream of building the institute.



Group photograph of the workshop participants

On the second day, the workshop had presentations on issues of preservation and conservation. They focused on many problems and described possible solutions involving both natural materials and technology. The broad spectrum of points from simple handling of archival material with care to the actual planning for disaster preparedness was well received by the participants. The need for professional training on par with international standards was also emphasized. The different media, format of the archival materials and the disaster management issues were discussed with reference to the topography and the climate of the location where the archives are situated.

The afternoon session was devoted to user's perspective on archives. The presentations in this session helped as a kind of feedback to gauge the quality of the archives in terms of their contents and the use of those contents for scientific research in the country. The view was expressed that proper finding tools and indexing of the archival contents would aid in better usage of archives in the country.

The last session was a panel discussion which was moderated by Professor Roddam Narasimha, FRS (JNCASR), who made brief remarks on four main issues namely, Copyright compliance, Developing archives, Identifying standards and the Need for National Science Archives in India. Though the discussion was geared to include opinions and views on these four points, it was not limited to only these issues. Many participants expressed the opinion that a workshop of this kind could be made into a series, organized biennially. They also endorsed the view of initiating a forum of archivists to carry out many of the recommendations of the workshop. Coincident with the National Workshop, IIA archives got a face-lift with more contents and better display with suitable lighting and controlled temperature. Care was taken to maintain the chronological sequence of scientific contents from the inception of the Institute. The astronomical instruments used in the observatories at Madras and Kodaikanal for different purposes are displayed in the archives. An exclusive panel depicting the pictures on Solar Eclipses from 1868 to 2006 is added as a part of the display in the archives.





IIA Archives

– C. Birdie