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# The Archival Book as an Experimental Dialogue in Public History

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## Keywords

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A book is not an isolated entity: it is a narration, an axis of innumerable narrations. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Notes on (toward) Bernard Shaw'

Other Inquisitions: Essays 1937-1952

## Bringing the Archives to the Public

Historians, as Terry Cook, archivist and theorizer of the archives, reminds us, share a 'symbiotic relationship' with the archives that has remained unexplored so far.¹ Despite their shared intellectual and professional roots, historians consult the archives as resources for their work and barely reflect on the 'history of the archives'. As Cook puts it: 'the archive(s) is a foreign country to many historians. Of course, it is one that they visit as tourists passing through, focusing on their appealing views, but overlooking their surroundings, inhabitants about what they do, thus failing to understand the country's real character and its animating soul.'² Public access to the archives has usually been through the works of the historian — where the archival material exists often as a fragment, already interpreted within the larger framework of a book. Archival resources appear here as supporting evidence for a historical argument.

The deepening interest in the creation of historical knowledge in postcolonial societies has seen the emergence of an interest in the archives that has been articulated mainly by



historians. However, institutional archives in postcolonial countries like India are generally accessed by historians or by writers and hardly by the general public.4 India, like many postcolonial countries has inherited systems of archiving that focus on written documents that are official in nature. Consequently, the practice of archiving has been functional and mechanical, transferring government records to the archives after thirty years. This routine, almost robotic way of archiving coupled with the difficulties of access have rendered archives invisible to the larger, general public in India. However, accessibility alone would not render visibility to the archives; history as a discipline of colonial origin, has also bequeathed an opacity to archival resources. The role of the historian, trained in interpreting the colonial archives has narrowed the scope of historiography in India too. <sup>5</sup> The rich resources of orality, memory and visuality – both photography and older forms of the visual arts - have been traditionally assigned to different disciplines: literature, anthropology and art history. While in recent years Indian historiography has witnessed a cultural turn that admits the analysis of literary texts, photographs and films as historical evidence, historical research remains confined to the analysis of archival documents and addresses academic audiences rather than the general public. Therefore, apart from bureaucratic constraints, the idea that archives as specialist institutions that is unavailable for scrutiny by the general public is fairly well established in India. Archives in India are not considered public spaces in postcolonial India. Public History in India would therefore need to nurture informed professional and public opinion about archives addressing audiences beyond academia and at the same time undertake an exercise that is both intellectual and pedagogic in nature.

Public history in the postcolonial context, therefore, needs to ask what does the process of archiving tell us about our relationship to the past? In what ways had institutions that originated in the colonial period reinvent their identities post-1947? How do the colonial foundations of academic disciplines shape the way our archives and museums relate to the past through documents and artifacts they store? How might we re-understand the idea of collecting an archive and what are the critical ways in which we might interpret archival material for a general public? The ways in which archival documents could be displayed for the benefit of the general public has been a question that has perplexed archivists and public historians alike. While archivists in India, have often enabled scholars to create scholarly editions of unique and rare texts, their own engagement with archival resources are often focused on conservation, cataloguing and the technicalities of record keeping. By contrast, the task of the public historian who wishes to present archival material to the public who has not had any access to such records or is unused to 'reading' and 'interpreting' archival material, is a complicated one, it involves an interesting form of public pedagogy which this paper will attempt to describe.

My earliest engagement with this predicament began when I took charge of setting up the Archives of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, in 2004. TIFR was founded by Homi Bhabha, the architect of India's Atomic Energy Programme in 1945. The Institute had planned to begin an Archive in its fiftieth year (1995) but had not, even in 2002, managed to create a substantial archive of its historical documents. In 2004, I was invited to put together the Archives of TIFR. At that point, I had spent two years at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, on a sabbatical from Jadavpur University where I was professor in the English Department. Becoming an archivist was a humbling task. It meant operating from outside of the established academic hierarchy. But it also offered an opportunity to create new modalities of communicating a significant period of India's contemporary history to a wider audience.

The two years I spent on TIFR campus (2004-2006) alerted me to the importance of dialogue and exchange with not only the scientific community but also the staff – administrators, peons, carpenters, glass-blowers, workshop staff, the cleaners, gardeners and cooks who contributed to institutional life. In order for this large community to grasp the significance of their institutional archives, it was crucial for them to view the many treasures and riches their archives housed. We began with exhibitions that explored different aspects of institutional life – the beginnings of molecular biology at what had until then been a physics



institution, Homi Bhabha's Cambridge connection and the partnership between science and industry as exemplified in the relationship between the scientist, Homi Bhabha and the legendary industrialist, J.R.D. Tata.

As part of an attempt to reach out to the community, Vrunda Pathare (at that point the Archival Assistant and at present the Head Archivist at the Godrej Archives, Mumbai) and I created the TIFR Archives Bulletin Board that presented an archival story with documents and photographs from the archives. The themes varied – from the early research on cosmic rays to correspondence between scientists, from tree transplantation to the Institute's legendary art collection – our hand-made archival bulletin boards displayed a story every month. The board was carried out of the archives and placed near the institute's west canteen and soon became a place where students, scientists and scientific, administrative and support staff gathered to read and discuss the archival material presented. From the discussions we had with our audience across the institutional hierarchy, this simple display had a great impact on the community's understanding of their institute's past.

### In Search of an Archival Book

In 2008, as the institute prepared to celebrate the centenary of its founder, Homi Bhabha, the Archives Bulletin Board inspired another public conversation. This time it took the form of what we later came to define as an archival book. The vision for the book was to narrate the story of Homi Bhabha's life using archival material – documents, photographs and paintings. However, the style of the Bulletin Board could not be easily translated into a book. Nor did a glossy coffee table format where the pictorial would dominate over text a satisfactory solution.

My experience at the margins of a hierarchical scientific institution also made me aware that a scholarly edition of the Homi Bhabha papers would do little to raise general public awareness of archival material. As the archivist at TIFR, I was excited by the possibility of showcasing photographs and documents that presented his scientific life as also the numerous letters that revealed the myriad shades of relationships Bhabha had with scientists, artists, writers, friends and colleagues alongside a commentary about his life. That this was an unusual concept and one that was difficult to translate into book design came home to me when the publisher presented an initial design: the designer had focused on the layout and used fragments of the archival documents to ornament the pages. The core purpose of the book was lost, as in this form no reader would be encouraged to pay attention to the archival documents. Thus, the archival book was first defined by what it was not: not a scrap-book that was similar in form to our Bulletin Board, nor a coffee table book; not a pictorial biography with photographs and archival documents placed within the chapters.<sup>8</sup>

The problem at the earliest stages of conceptualization can be summarized as follows: How to bring together the life of the scientist alongside his archive? It was at this stage, I realized that the project needed a designer who would see the archival material as substantially contributing to the content as well as to the design of the book. In fact, the archival material told us a lot about the scientist, his international network, his interests, and of course, about his times. The book design had to be appropriate for the task. The project needed a designer who would be able to transform the archival material into a book that communicated with the general public.

Sarita Sundar, (at that time with the design firm, Trapeze) welcomed the project and brought to it her deep understanding of book design, design history and visual communication. It was also at this stage that my co-author Ananya Dasgupta, editor and writer with a keen understanding of scientific communication joined the project. At that point, Ananya had joined the TIFR Archives as an oral historian. Our team configured and re-shaped what an archival book needed to focus on. The extra design cost was funded by ARCH (Archival Resources for Contemporary History), the Consultancy Unit I had founded in 2009. Although TIFR Archives did not fund the project directly, it generously made available the archival material



used in the book. In gratitude, as authors we shared the royalty with the TIFR Archives. The collaborative nature of the project was clear from the beginning.

## Framing the Archives

By the time we started work with Sarita Sundar, we already had a few things ready. We had written up the story of Bhabha's life in clear accessible language using anecdotes that would hold the attention of our audience. At the same time, we had for each of our chapters, archival documents, photographs and excerpts of oral history interviews about the scientist. But working closely with a designer, we soon realized involved an engagement with historical materiality at multiple levels. As Sarita looked through the archival material, she printed out and arranged them on the walls of her studio and asked detailed questions about every bit of archival material. Beyond that she was keen to see photographs of what Bhabha's office looked like.

Apart from questions about his institution's large collection of modern Indian art, she wanted to know what kind of objects did he have on his desk, what kind of chair he used, what he wore and the music he listened to. We concluded that the photographs, letters, paintings and sketches that the archives had all spoke of a man who was not only in tune with his times but also a man whose taste reflected a modernity that was 'contemporary and European in its essence'. This understanding alongside Bhabha's deep commitment to the internationalism of the scientific endeavor made it possible for us to move away from the narrow nationalist way in which the life of many Indian scientists had been presented. The larger international focus also allowed us to pay attention to different dimensions of Bhabha's life that the biographies written so far had not focused on. All these aspects led us to the design of the book that used design not as ornamentation but as an organic and integral part of the book by creating a narrative and a rhythm that defined the logic of the book's unfolding.

The conceptual trajectory of the design of this book began in our conversations about the material culture of the articles that the scientist had collected. When I had begun the process of setting up the TIFR Archives, my office was located in the auditorium foyer, adjoining the 'replica' of Bhabha's office which was on the fourth floor of TIFR.<sup>11</sup> I was fascinated and intrigued by the Tulip Chair – considered an icon of modern industrial design, in his office. Designed by Eero Saarinen, the Finnish-American industrial designer in 1955, the chair, as archival documents confirmed, was acquired by Homi Bhabha the same year as it became available commercially. What fascinates historians can open up other dimensions of understanding for designers. For Sarita, the presence of the Tulip chair confirmed what other archival documents were hinting at – the international reach of Bauhaus, the modernist movement founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar, Germany that functioned from 1918 to 1938, prior to the rise of Nazi Germany. For Sarita, 'traces of the conceptual language that began at Bauhaus' were visible at Bhabha's institute – not only 'in the paintings that Bhabha acquired but in the architecture and the landscape.' <sup>12</sup>

The book design drew from Bauhaus – using a colour palette associated with Bauhaus, that used reds, blues and steel grey. Her choice of typography and use of machine-derived fonts were also in keeping with modernist principles. It was Sarita who gave our book a form that could bring together the history of design in a way that would let the archival material live and breathe through the pages. To quote the 'Design Note': 'The design of this book grew out of an intimate dialogue between the archival material and the history and principles of design as it evolved in the mid-twentieth century.'<sup>13</sup>

The archival book then was one that had to be constructed visually within a historical frame. It demanded a very close collaboration between the historian, writer and designer. Moreover, the archival material and book design had to be in conversation with each other. That is why the design of the book had to speak a language that reflected the archival material, both visually and aesthetically. This conceptualization enabled us to move away from the convention of representing the past through sepia-toned photographs that illustrated the text rather than photographs that engaged in conversations with the text. Our book



used a mix of black and white and a few coloured images always taking care to historicize them. The historical frame of the book looked at two aspects of the past in order to create a meaningful encounter with the archive: the history of science in India (which included Homi Bhabha's Archives as well as archival resources from his institution) and the history of design the elements of which could reflect the environment within which he worked to set up the institutions he created. Design, therefore, was not just about ornamentation but was the very ground on which the archival book stood thus, enabling us to create a book that could open up the archives of the scientist to the public.

## Annotating the Archives for the Public

Archival material is not self-explanatory. Indeed, as Kenneth Foote as argued, different societies value different forms of collective memory:

In one society, oral and ritual traditions may predominate, while in another society they may be allied with archival records, written documentation, and even elements of material culture such as monuments and memorials.<sup>14</sup>

In India, collective memory may reside in the cultures of orality that circulate widely. Access to archival documents is the privilege of the literate. While historians are trained to pay attention to the specific nuances of documents from the past, a public historian needs to work hard to communicate the significance of each archival document to a public not used to looking at archival documents. Our decision as researchers and writers was to present the archival material with notes that explained their significance. We also placed the documents alongside excerpts from oral history interviews with scientists, workers and relatives who spoke to us about the scientist. This strategy of juxtaposing archival documents and people's reminiscences thus layered the memory embodied in the archival book in complex ways.

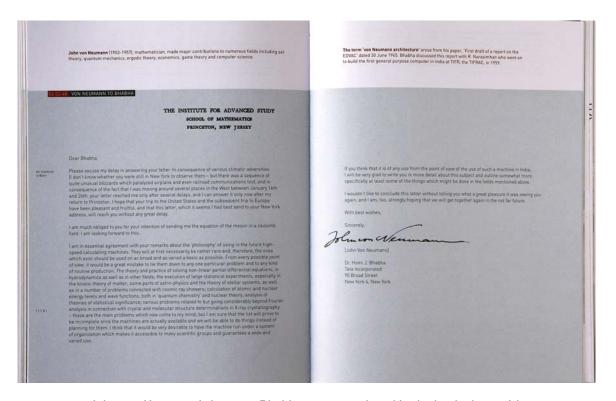
Bhabha's balloon flight experiments undertaken at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore during the war years are discussed in letters he wrote to scientists – R.H. Millikan and Wolfgang Ernst Pauli, which we reproduced completely. We also included a group photograph taken during Millikan's visit in 1940 when he had conducted cosmic ray experiments in Bangalore as well as a photograph of a later cosmic ray experiment using balloons from 1943 showing Bhabha and his Laboratory Assistant, G.V. Vasudevachar. Later in the same chapter, we included a short excerpt from an interview with G.V. Vasudevachar who recalled the context of the photograph and the pieces of lead that they had mounted in the payload of the balloon during that experiment. Indeed, the reminiscence section included eminent scientists as well as family members, laboratory assistants and workshop workers. Unlike, its glossy cousin, the coffee table book, the archival book enabled us to cut across social hierarchies and present hitherto unnoticed aspects of this eminent scientist's life.

Aware that archival material needed interpretation, we annotated every document that we included, providing biographical details where it was required as well as historical context. For example, we included a note that contextualized John von Neumann's reply to Bhabha's letter dated 3 February 1948. (See the accompanying image of the two pages from the book.) Later, in the same chapter, we included an excerpt from my oral history interview with Rangaswamy Narasimhan, who had designed India's first general purpose digital computer, the TIFRAC in 1960:

He said he would like to get a computer group started and asked what kind of background I had in computers, whether I knew the von Neumann Report, which was a classic. So I told him I had read all that. At the institute there was already a group of people who were building logical circuits ... So we tried to put all this together and build a computer. After I arrived, Bhabha first personally and officially got involved in the project when I gave a seminar on the logical aspects of computers and



what could be done if the project was granted. It was taken for granted as a statement of what we hoped to do and could be done, and the seminar was attended by all the big shots.<sup>15</sup>



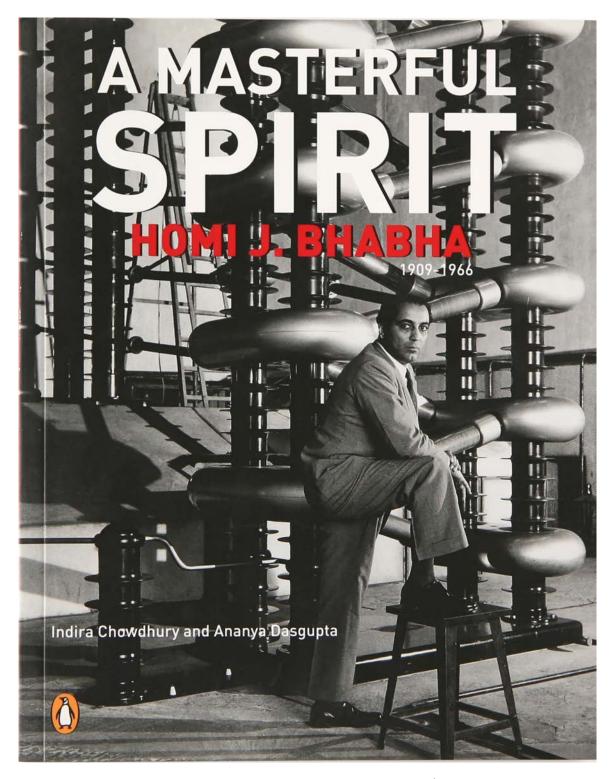
John von Neumann's letter to Bhabha was reproduced in the book along with annotations. In order to fit the contents into the page, the letter was re-set in the font used in the book. The page design retained his signature and the letterhead of the Institute of Advanced Study. (Courtesy Hanno; photograph Manoj Sudhakaran)

Our notes included on top of every page that reproduced an archival document brought together multiple narratives. In this particular case, it reminded readers of John von Neumann's exchange with Bhabha (earlier in the book) in 1948, a year after Indian independence, that concluded with: 'If you think that it is of any use from the point of view of the use of such a machine in India, I will be very glad to write to you in more details about this subject and outline somewhat more specifically at least some of the things which might be done in the fields mentioned above.' The history of science in contemporary India had not adequately engaged with archival material and our attempt in this book was to present the larger socio-cultural milieu to which the scientist belonged as well as the international network that he drew on in his institution building practice.

The multiple narratives that are embedded in the book set up a dialogue between our introduction and commentary, between the documents, photographs and oral histories. This constant flow of dialogue, we thought, suited the new form of the archival book, which we had set out to define. The multi-layered text allowed the lay reader to collate and compare the diverse anecdotes and narratives and enabled the formation of a mental image of the scientist and his life and times.

The photographs used in the book were curated to add a visual layer to the narrative of the book. But the cover photograph of Homi Bhabha in front of the Cascade Generator (c1953) fulfilled an additional function. The scientist posing in front of the newly acquired machine that no other institute in India could boast of at that time, tells us about Bhabha's stature as a scientist who was respected and supported





Homi Bhabha in front of the Cascade Generator, 1953 (Courtesy Hanno; photography Manoj Sudhakaran)



by the state. But from the design perspective, it shows us the man and the machine and speaks the same language of modernity as the book design inspired by Bauhaus. The photographs in the book are rarely used as illustrations; sometimes the photograph adds a significant dimension to the narrative that the archival material misses. Thus we included a spread that focuses on the Bhabha family, their aristocratic demeanor, the Parsi community he was part of, their way of dressing and the nuclearized family he belonged to. Though the spread is placed within a chapter that focuses on Bhabha's childhood, it focuses our attention on a montage that includes photographs from 1910, 1920 and 1940 (his adolescence and his adult years) on the verso and a quotation about Meherbai, Bhabha's mother by his second cousin, Roshan Rivetna on recto, forming a coherent unit. Functioning as a narrative bundle, this unit enables us to present Bhabha's childhood alongside his adult years through the trope of family and intimacy (Chapter 1: The House on Little Gibbs Street, in *A Masterful Spirit: Homi Bhabha 1909–1966*, pp10–11).

Throughout the book, such narrative bundles bring together different aspects of the impact socio-political life on the lives of scientists. In another spread, the book presents a photograph of the Soviet Premier, Nikolai Bulganin and Party Secretary, Nikita Khruschev looking at cosmic ray tracks on stacks under a microscope. The photograph taken during their visit to the institute in 1955 is presented alongside a quote from a letter written by Bhabha to Professor Choksi of the Tata Trusts that he would like to visit the Soviet Union in the future. The quotation ends with: 'As a high-level academic institution there must be as much intellectual freedom in the TIFR as there is in any British University'. The facing page includes an excerpt from an article from the physicist Bernard Peters who had spent seven years at TIFR when he became a victim of the witch hunts during the McCarthy era. This narrative bundle aimed to bring together science and the politics of the Cold War era and draws our attention to Bhabha's open-mindedness in providing a refuge to a scientist like Bernard Peters who was being persecuted in the USA. (Chapter 6: An Institute is Born, in *A Masterful Spirit: Homi Bhabha 1909–1966*, pp124–125).

Although the design of the book eschewed a scrap-booking approach, we used elements that are conventionally used in scrapbooking to enhance the pages. Thus, the pages that reprinted Bhabha's correspondence used stamps and watermarks as well as cut-outs of addresses, post-cards and stamps as design elements that remained readable and meaningful even if their purpose was to embellish the pages. The diverse stories that the book presented were intertwined with a timeline of events in India and the world that ran on the top of most pages. The timeline included political events, scientific discoveries and cultural movements. Our idea was to provide a ready historical context for the reader so that they could easily reference the narratives that appeared in the pages. We created this intentionally, offering the reader multiple entry points into the life of the scientist. The reading experience was also designed as a non-linear one, disrupting the conventional idea of reading sequentially from the beginning of a book to its end. This book could be begun at any point that formed the arc of the scientist's life and the reader would still be able to contextualize the archival material and relate them to national and international events. The archival book we designed was thus able to enter into multiple conversations with its readers. <sup>18</sup> Unlike a scholarly edition of archival material that could be daunting for a general public, the archival book as we designed it, enabled the ordinary reader to experience the look and feel of archival documents and photographs and link these with the memories shared through excerpted oral histories.

#### Conclusion

In India, history is a frequently contested battle that is carried out in the public space by politicians and the tools of the historian are rarely made accessible to the public.<sup>19</sup> Despite the public-ness of historical debates, the general public is rarely able to access historical documents. Archives are open to writers, scholars and historians. Scholarly engagement with the archives of scientist addresses historians of science and not the general public.



It was precisely because India does not offer ready access to the archives to its general public that archival books of this kind should be viewed as significant public history interventions within the postcolonial context. Our effort was therefore make archives accessible through a new genre of book making. Our project was a collaborative one where designer, writer, historian and archivist worked together. The archive was not just the resource from which we retrieved elements of the past, it also functioned as a source of many conversations. We created through this new genre of book, an 'axis of innumerable narrations' as Borges put it.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the archival book, could continue those innumerable dialogues with our readers and add a myriad dimensions and layers of narratives to the book too.<sup>21</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the TIFR Archives, Mumbai, my co-author, Ananya Dasgupta, Sarita Sundar and Vivek Dhareshwar for insightful discussions.

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Terry Cook, 'The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape', *The American Archivist*, vol 74, no 2, 2011, p601. https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.74.2.xm04573740262424
- 2 ibid. p.605
- 3 See Antoinette Burton, Archive Stories: Facts, Fiction and the Writing of History, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2005 and Ann Laura Stoler, Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2009.
- 4 Archives, in the Indian context, present a contrast to museums or heritage sites that are accessible and also frequently visited by large crowds.
- 5 Subaltern Studies that emerged in the 1980s in India began to analyze the relationship between dominance and hegemony within the colonial system using as resources documents in the colonial archives. Only Shahid Amin among the subaltern historians used oral history as a resource with which to understand contemporary history. See Shahid Amin, Chauri Chaura, 1922-1990: Event, Metaphor, Memory, University of California Press, 1995.
- 6 Sudeshna Guha's edited volume *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology*, Mapin, New Delhi. Alkazi Collection of Photography *Ocean Township*, Grantha, NJ, 2010, looks at the ways in which photographs are used for creating archaeological knowledge is a significant example of a scholarly book published in the same year as the archival book being discussed here
- 7 The National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore is administratively part of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai.
- 8 When we started, we were not aware of Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz and Erdut Wizisla (eds), Walter Benjamin's Archive, translated by Esther Leslie, Verso, London, 2007. This beautiful archival book that I saw for the first time in 2010, is in fact a well-designed scholarly edition of Benjamin's papers. It does not, however, use design to structure the narrative as the archival book I am defining here does.
- 9 Sarita Sundar and Indira Chowdhury, 'Design Note' in Indira Chowdhury and Ananya Dasgupta, *A Masterful Spirit: Homi Bhabha 1909-1966*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2010, p257.
- 10 See G. Venkataraman, *Bhabha and his Magnificent Obsession*, Universities Press, Hyderabad, 1994 and Chintamani Deshmukh, *Homi Jehangir Bhabha*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2005).
- 11 After Homi Bhabha's tragic death in an air crash in 1966, his office remained unoccupied for more than thirty years. In 1997, after Professor S.S. Jha became director, Bhabha's office furniture and other objects were moved to the museum area in the auditorium foyer of the institute. The office was 'reconstructed' with actual furniture and objects from his office and put on display. For a discussion see, Indira Chowdhury, *Growing the Tree of Science: Homi Bhabha and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, pp225-228.
- 12 Sarita Sundar and Indira Chowdhury, 'Design Note', A Masterful Spirit, p257.
- 13 ibid.
- 14 Kenneth Foote, 'To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture', *The American Archivist*, vol 53, no 3, 1990, p380. https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.53.3.d87u013444j3g6r2
- 15 Chowdhury and Dasgupta, op cit, p147.
- 16 ibid, p119. See photograph of the page included here.



- 17 The one million-volt Cockcroft-Walton accelerator (Cascade Generator) was installed at Bhabha's institute, TIFR in 1953. The machine was purchased by the Atomic Energy Commission (which Homi Bhabha also headed) but was housed at TIFR. See photograph of the cover included here.
- 18 Budgetary constraints and the categorization of the book as a popular non-fiction did not allow us to include an index or a bibliography.
- 19 See Srijan Sandip Mandal, 'Public History: Towards a credible engagement with the past', *Lila-interactions*, vol 3, no 2, 2020 available at: <a href="https://lilainteractions.in/the-marketplace-of-the-past/">https://lilainteractions.in/the-marketplace-of-the-past/</a>.
- 20 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Notes on (toward) Bernard Shaw,' Other Inquisitions: Essays 1937-1952, p428.
- 21 Since the creation of the book on Homi Bhabha described here, the Center for Public History, where I work, has created several archival books for institutions in India. These are written collectively and do not attribute authorship to a single author but to the Centre. These are: Citizens and Revolutionaries: An Oral History of IIM Calcutta, Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2012; Looking back, Looking forward: An Oral History of IMSc, Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, 2016; The Lives of Objects: Stories from the Indian Museum, Indian Museum, Kolkata, 2017; The Story of Sasha, Sasha Association of Craft Producers, Kolkata, 2017; Lessons in Living: Stories from the Life of Triguna Sen, National Council of Education (Bengal), Kolkata, 2018.