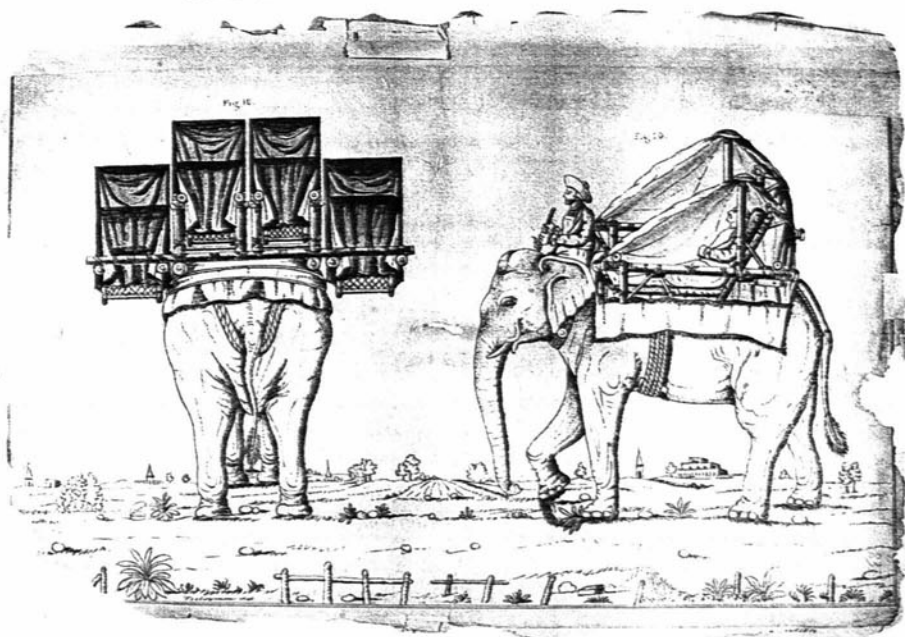


# NATIONAL ARCHIVES MUSEUM

Text and Photographs: Dr. Gautam Chatterjee

If you want to glance through history or delve deep into it, the Archives Museum is a must. Recent exhibits include documents from the British era but there are those which date back hundreds of years to the time of Akbar and much before.

**T**hink of archives and you will immediately recall some great stock of centuries old yellow paper, brittle and full of dust kept in bundles. This visualisation is not really untrue. Way back in 1984, I started digging through records from the archives and faced restrictions of all kinds right from accessing records to facing refusal in the name of NT (Not Transferred), brittle or classified. And when I finally could lay my hands on an important file of Lord Dalhousie, I was faced with another obstacle—the handwriting and spellings such as Cawnpure (modern Kanpur). Hours of reading would finally make one document understandable. This has been the experience of most scholars and historians wanting to research the

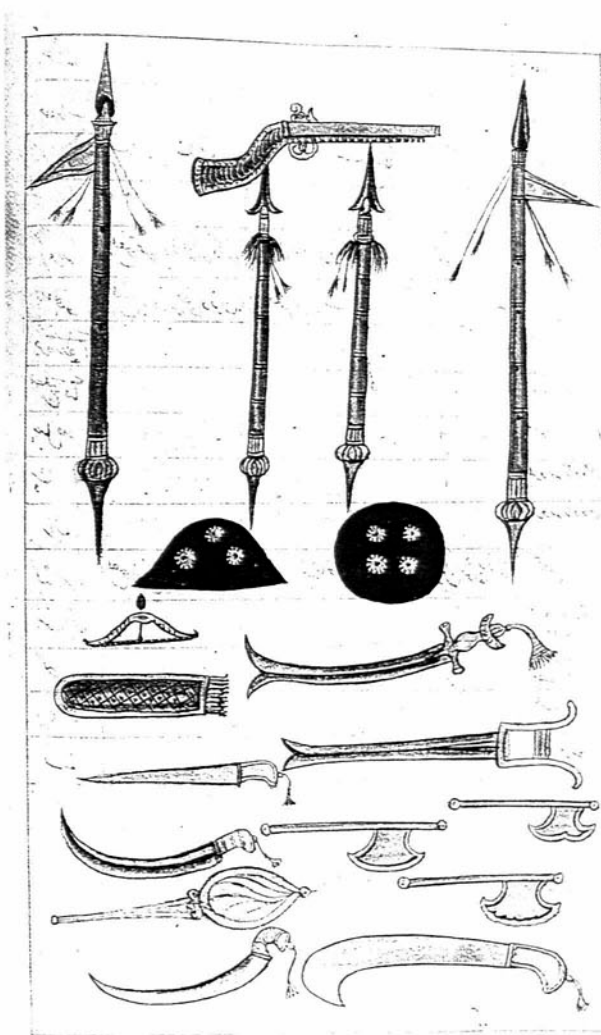


archives. This is why the archives have never appealed to people as a historical window like the National Museum.

But today, in the 51st year of independence, the National Archives of India has for the first time in Indian history opened a Museum of Archives for the public with a different aesthetic punctuation on show. A part of this heritage building houses this museum which takes you back in time. The President of India, His Excellency Mr. Narayanan wrote, "An excellent creation". Elaborating on the maiden venture Dr. S.S. Sengupta said, "Doors are open now! Restrictions are gone...paper heritage is presented with colour punctuations of a bygone era..."

As one enters the Archives Museum, the *farmaan* (declaration) of Akbar dated 27th August 1598 AD can be seen which granted land in favour of a temple in Mathura. A *parwana* (document) of a noble of Feroz Shah Tughlaq, dated 19th October 1352 AD, grants revenue-free land. These historical documents are fascinating because of their level of decoration and calligraphy. There are various other documents on display, the longest being a treaty between the East India Company and Siam (present Myanmar) which is in three different languages.

The archives are not just a bundle of official orders. It has various illustrations as well — beautiful visuals



Facing page above: An Indian Company soldier

Facing page below: Wounded soldiers being carried in elephant 'ambulance'

Above: Armoury as found in ancient archival files

Below: Ancient manuscript of Persian origin

of the past kept alive for posterity. There are scenes showing ambulances driven by camels, elephants etc. with wounded soldiers being carried to the hospital and hunting scenes superimposed with astronomical charts. In the olden days these were consulted to determine which directions would be safe and fruitful. There are several original seals from the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Dalip Singh and those like the Bohra of the 18th century.

Akbar's *Ain-i-Akbari* (copy) dated 27th April 1824 detailing the administration and statistics of his empire and Firdausi's *Shahnama*, composed in Persian in 1010 AD, are also amongst the exhibits. A *sanad* (document) in Persian sent to Maharaja Dalip Singh by the East India Company, confiscating his rights and demanding the presentation of the Kohinoor, can also be viewed. There are enlarged pictures of traditional professions and their costumes like the *dholak* players, *hakuras* etc. There is

enough material here to enthuse the modern fashion designer looking for the 'very ethnic'.

Rare bamboo leaf documents of the Ramayana written in Bengali and various others in Sharda and Gilghit scripts can also be seen in this museum. The ornamented Bhagavad Gita and other medicinal and astronomical books like the ancient Mahurut Chakritra are rare and prized exhibits. A dictionary of eight languages prepared by Fort William is awe-inspiring. Today's modern man will be amazed on seeing a document called the 'Bengal Smoke Nuisance Bill, 1904' which refers to all types of pollution. Alongside, rules for cutting timber in the government forests are an 'eye-opener'.

Many more exhibits are yet to be added like the 'Sacred Soils' of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Sukhdev, photographs of many unsung heroes of the freedom struggle procured from the Bengal Police records and epaulettes of the Indian National Army's soldiers.