



Remembrance of things past

An exploration of three online archive projects that are preventing our heritage from sinking into oblivion

What we call history is but fragments of the past, the seashells cast ashore by the waves of time. Time devours everything, and everything we value is doomed to be swallowed by this monster. Yet, if man is not a mere brute, he must battle the turbulent waves and salvage some of the precious cargo left by his ancestors. All history-keeping is, indeed, a rescue operation, and one example of this is the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA, www.saadigitalarchive.org), a Philadelphia-based online project that is working to preserve the stories and experiences of South Asian

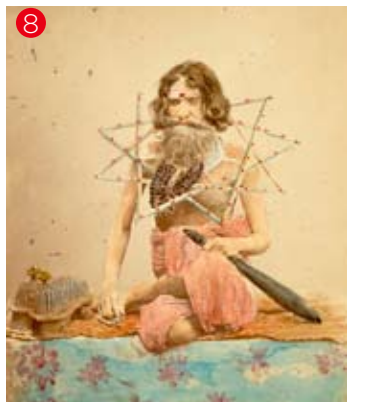
Americans. "We started this organisation (in 2008) because we realised that the history of South Asians in the US wasn't being collected or preserved systematically by any museum or organisation. We feared that this history was in danger of being lost," says Samip Mallick, 31, co-founder of SAADA. SAADA is currently a volunteer-driven non-profit organisation that, in the upcoming months, will have its first round of fund-raising. On the SAADA website, you will find more than 800 archival items: photographs, books, letters, pamphlets, speeches, news stories and more; the oldest material dates back to the 1680s. While exploring the site, one learns about many extraor-

inary men and women. There are photographs of the first Indian-American senator, Dalip Singh Saund; there are books about India's freedom struggle written by Indians who were based in the US; there are images of Anandabai Joshee, "known as the first Hindu woman to receive a Degree of Doctor of Medicine in any country"; there are more than 150 items related to Bhagwan Singh Gyane, who, from 1914 to 1920, was the president of the Ghadar Party, which was founded in San Francisco as an anti-colonial organisation that advocated complete freedom for India. The material, says Mallick, whose parents migrated to the States in the 1960s, is gathered in two ways. One is

from collaborating with other institutions, such as universities, to obtain "material that has not been necessarily identified as important to the community". The other is by digitising the private collections of community members themselves. For instance, all the material that exists on Gyane is being collected from his grandson, who had diligently preserved it in his house, in Atlanta. "It was never seen outside before (we digitised them)," says Mallick, who has a masters in archival studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Speaking of private albums, the Indian Memory Project (www.indianmemoryproject.com) narrates the story of our past through

sepia-toned photographs found in family archives. The site has close to 100 visuals, all shot before 1990, and all of them posted along with stories written by the readers who have provided them. "Most people speak with great pride about their parents, grandparents and cousins, and about what they did," says 37-year-old Anusha Yadav, who's the founder of the project. Apart from accepting photos through emails, Yadav, a Mumbai-based portrait photographer, is also "visiting families, going through their archives and selecting photos to showcase". IMP started off, in 2010, as a Facebook page, on which Yadav used to ask her friends to send wedding photographs for the wedding book

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1. F M Coleman's Typical Pictures of Indian Natives was one of the earliest books with colour photographs to be published in India (1902/ Rare Book Society of India)

2. Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian-American writer and lecturer, was involved in a legal battle to obtain US citizenship for Indians (1918/South Asian American Digital Archive)

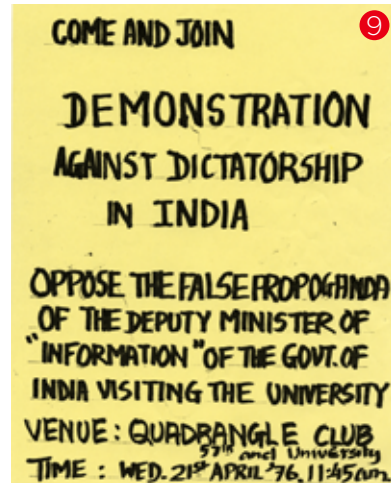
3. Businessman Gulab Watumull, one of the richest men in Hawaii, is known for philanthropic activities promoting Indian culture (SAADA)

4. A photograph of a Marathi theatrical troupe, from the Lee-Warner Collection: 'Bombay Presidency' (1870/RBSI)

5. Anand Halve and his sister Jyoti, along with some children belonging to Andaman & Nicobar's Ongee Tribe (1960/Indian Memory Project)

6. Bhagwan Singh Gyane served as the president of the Ghadar party from 1914 to 1920 (SAADA)

7. M M Venugopal Reddy Yekollu (holding a crane) with his brother M M Rajagopal



8. Reddy (seated at right); their father had donated a stretch of land from Jolarpet to Kuppam, in Bangalore, to the British, for railways (1930/IMP)

9. Portrait of a sanyasi: hand coloured albumen print by Nicholas Bros. (1860/RBSI)

10. Flyer protesting an Indian government representative's visit to the University of Chicago, during the Indian Emergency (1976/ SAADA)

11. Veena Sajjani was the winner of the Miss India contest in 1970 (IMP)



she was planning to write. But people started sharing all sorts of photos from their family albums, along with nostalgic stories, and soon Yadav shifted to a wordpress blog. A few months ago, IMP was re-launched as a website. It has, through its journey, found 13 patrons, who have given the project technical support and/or donated mon-

ey. The project is a striking case of how, on the internet, a simple idea can bloom into something completely unexpected. Rare Book Society of India (www.facebook.com/pages/Rare-Book-Society-of-India) was founded in 2009, as a Facebook group to share rare books, but it has now become a repository of not

just links and listings of old books (from sources such as Project Gutenberg and archive.org) but also a forum where one discovers beautiful lithographs, photographs, paintings and other artworks (sourced from online museums, such as Wellcome Library, London). Browsing the site casually, I discovered what is the only video of Mark Twain, which was recorded by Thomas Edison in 1909; I learned that the first printed map of Asia was published in 1540, by Sebastian Munster, "one of the most important map makers" of the 16th century; I bookmarked the link to 'India as known to the Ancient World', a book written by Gauranga Nath Banerjee, which was first published in 1921. The man behind RBSI is Bangalore-based Subbiah Yadalam, a businessman who is a passionate collector of rare books. The 50-year-old Yadalam tells me that the group has close to 7000 members — including professors and researchers — spanning 21 countries, and he hopes that the community sparks a change in people's attitude towards history. "We are a history-illiterate country. Our archives and libraries are rotting away. Without the sense of history, we will have no identity."

— JAIDEEP DAVE