Data Ethics For Archival Science & Historical Research - Principles, Challenges, and Professional Responsibilities - A Case Study of India

By - Dr. Meena Gautam ,
Senior Academic Fellow,
Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR)

UNDERSTANDING ETHICS: RELEVANCE AND PURPOSE

Ethics = Moral principles guiding conduct and professional practice

- **Ethical dilemmas** arise, when no single "right" answer exists
- Institutions **create codes to ensure integrity, accountability, & public trust**
- **Critical in Archives**: Access to information, records management

CODES OF ETHICS VS CODES OF CONDUCT

- **CODE OF ETHICS**: Foundational values and ideals
- **CODE OF CONDUCT**: Practical rules for specific situations
- **Archives** - Need clear protocols for access, use, and disclosure of records
- **Unauthorized access** = UNETHICAL + often UNLAWFUL

PURPOSE OF ARCHIVAL ETHICS

- Preserve documentary heritage with dignity and accuracy
- Balance 4 Core Duties: **PRESERVATION – ACCESS – PRIVACY - ACCOUNTABILITY**
- **Archivists** = **CUSTODIANS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY**
- **Enable equitable access: physical + digital catalogues**

ETHICS AND THE ARCHIVAL PROFESSION

- Ethical codes help navigate complex situations
- Establish expectations: RESPONSIBILITY – INTEGRITY - - PUBLIC SERVICE
- Access must respect - PRIVACY and CONFIDENTIALITY
- Protection of individual rights is fundamental

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHIVAL ETHICS

- Global professionalization led to formal ethical codes
- Standards by: SAA, ACA, Australia, Europe
- ICA CODE OF ETHICS FOR ARCHIVISTS; Adopted: Beijing, 6 September 1996
- International benchmark for policy and training

ARCHIVAL ETHICS IN INDIA

Core Principles:

- Respect for **PROVENANCE & ORIGINAL ORDER**
- Preservation, **Conservation & Custody**
- Maintenance of **Archival Value**

Guided by Legislation:

- Public Records **Act, 1993 & Rules**
- **RTI Act, 2005 | IT Act, 2000 & Jan Vishwas Act, 2023, & Companies Act, 1956/2013 & related University Grants Commission (UGC) Regulations**

Note: India lacks a separate written National Archival Code of Ethics

CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ON ARCHIVES AND ETHICS

- Limited scholarly debate in India until recently.
- Key: “Archives, Ethics and the Law in India: A Guidebook”, A NCBS & Milli Archives Collective, 2022. ICA-FIDA
- GAP: Ethical-legal status of private/corporate archives unexplored
- **No legal mandate for preservation of private records**

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historians must:

- Respect **PROVENANCE** and historical context
- Preserve **INTEGRITY** of sources - no alteration
- Provide **COMPLETE** and **ACCURATE CITATIONS**
- Prevent **PLAGIARISM** - credit all sources
- Applies to: **Archives, Oral History, Digital sources**

RESPONSIBLE HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

- Present **BALANCED** narratives with multiple viewpoints
- Avoid polemics **disguised** as objective history
- Use **RESPECTFUL, PRECISE, CONTEXTUAL** language
- Resist **distortion** for political goals
- Digital posting must respect **COPYRIGHT, PRIVACY**

COMMON ETHICAL DILEMMAS FOR HISTORIANS

- **Incomplete Records**: Must **acknowledge gaps and Avoid speculation**
- **Confidential Files**: Use only after **declassification**
- **Conflicting Sources**: Report if oral + documentary evidence are contradictory, **Analyze it**.
- **PRIVACY vs VALUE**: Anonymize **sensitive letters. Observe embargoes**
- **Academic Independence**: Disclose funding. Resist pressure

WHY ETHICS MATTERS IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical scholarship shapes: Policies - Law – Education and Public Memory

Examples from India:

- **LAND DISPUTES**: Courts are still using colonial settlement reports,
- **STATE REORGANIZATION Act, 1956**: Historical evidence had generated territorial and linguistic debates. Biased history fuels conflict.
- **PARTITION 1947**: Oral history research - Respect for consent, privacy, and dignity; traumatic events require particular ethical sensitivity.

ETHICS, PUBLIC MEMORY, AND COMMUNAL HARMONY

- **Selective history can deepen social divisions**

Historians should:

- Colonial records terms revolutionary freedom fighters as Terrorists , **analyse the biased data carefully**
- Present **Contested Evidence** transparently
- Explain **Historiographical Debates**
- Distinguish **Analysis from Advocacy**
- Trauma-sensitive: **Partition histories need consent & traumatic events require particular ethical sensitivity.**

PROTECTING MARGINALIZED VOICES

TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

- Colonial records often contain biases - Colonial **"Criminal Tribe"** records are biased,
- Duty to **Contextualize**, not reproduce discrimination

DALIT HISTORIES

- Family papers/caste records, *'panchayet'* Village community local records are vital sources
- Requires: Community engagement, permission, attribution

ARCHIVES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Private Papers & Personal Records Like :

- Nehru, Gandhi, Cariappa Papers etc., Princely archives: **make distinction between general and sensitive material**
- Must **follow DONOR AGREEMENTS and EMBARGOES**

DIGITIZATION INITIATIVES

- Expands access via *Abhilekh Patal*
- Needs: **Accurate metadata, provenance, community respect**



MAINTAINING PUBLIC TRUST

- **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY** sustains confidence in discipline
- **PLAGIARISM** damages reputation and verifiability
- Transparent citation = **ACCOUNTABILITY -** flawed data leads to flawed policy on conservation/tourism

- **KEY MESSAGE: Ethical failures affect law, education, community**

LEGAL VS ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

LEGAL STANDARDS	ETHICAL STANDARDS
Derived from Statutes	Derived from Professional Norms
Written by Government	Based on Society & Profession
Estb. Minimum Compliance	Higher Responsibility
Ex: Transfer of Property Act, 1882 Sec 122	Honor donor intent beyond law Must refer to available Code of Ethics

- An action can be LEGAL but UNETHICAL

ETHICS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

CHALLENGES:

- Access barriers: low digital literacy & resources
- Copyright, Privacy, Technical obsolescence
- Emails, photos, e-docs hard to preserve

Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) ACT, 2023:

- Free, informed consent for personal data
- Retain only as needed. Delete/anonymize after

ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

- Access promotes **Transparency - Participation - Accountability**
- Citizens must engage meaningfully with public records

- **Ethical archives**: promote equitable access while balancing privacy and legal obligations
- **"Information is Power"** – RTI - Information access contributes to informed citizenship and institutional trust & empowers the weakest.

CONCLUSION

THREE CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

1. ARCHIVISTS: Preserve with integrity. Access with privacy.
2. HISTORIANS: Academic integrity. Respect sources & communities.
3. INSTITUTIONS: Adopt National Code aligned with ICA.

We safeguard Not Just Documents, but TRUST for Future Generations.

THANK YOU