



# A tryst with the past

The history and heritage of the Tata group is alive and well preserved at the Tata Central Archives

American automobile manufacturer Henry Ford, who founded the Ford Motor Company was a no-nonsense pragmatist. In an interview published in the Chicago Tribune in May 1916, he said “History is more or less nonsense. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today.”

There are plenty who will vehemently disagree with Ford’s philosophy that history can be disconnected from present-day reality. For instance the group of kids from an orphanage who are visiting the Tata Central Archives (TCA) to learn more about Jamsetji Tata, the man in their text books. Or the old Air India employees who get teary-eyed from nostalgia on seeing the accurately re-constructed office of JRD Tata. Or the dealer groups, for whom association with the Tatas is such an honour that they buy all the books on sale and even ask for the bookmarks. And what about the man who took his children for a tour of the Tata archives but waited outside because he didn’t have five rupees to spring for his own ticket (an incident that prompted the TCA management to scrap the token fee and make the archives free to the public).

## Capturing history

History is far from nonsense. In fact, man needs the past to make sense of the present and derive a purpose and intent for the future. History is a documentation of the story of the people, how they came to be, what transpired as a result of their being and what are the

possibilities for the future. Disregarding history takes away the advantage of knowledge.

The history of the Tata group is in many ways intrinsically tied in with India’s growth. “The Tata Central Archives is much more than a museum of India’s best known industrial group,” said TR Doongaji, managing director, Tata Services. “It is in many ways the history of the industrialisation of India which the Tatas pioneered.”

It was a singular event during JRD Tata’s time that convinced him that restoring, preserving and harnessing Tata history was crucial. JRD discovered that a lot of information on Tata’s airline, from 1932 when Air India was first set up until its nationalisation in 1953, had disappeared, except for what little there was in his personal files. There was no documentation of the airline’s initial exhilarating formation. Feeling that Tata history was in danger of being obliterated, JRD mooted the idea of creating archives that would preserve a record of the Tata journey. The plan was revived in 1980 after the centenary celebrations of Jamsetji’s first venture, the Empress Mills in Nagpur which he set up in 1877. The archives were eventually launched by JRD at a function in January 1991.

## Looking back

Today, the archives are located at Mangaldas Road in Pune in the cool environs of the Tata Management Training Centre. A side road to the sprawling property unsuspectingly opens onto the archive driveway. The peace and quiet within the compound is a stark contrast



The re-created office of JRD Tata

to the bustle of the city outside, and is undisturbed by the ongoing renovation.

The foyer is dominated by a luminous milky white marble bust of Jamsetji Tata that has its own little tale. Chief archivist Deepthi Sasidharan recounts the incident, “When the bust was sent from Jamshedpur, workmen around here thought Jamsetji Tata was a saint because it was given such a tearful farewell there and it was treated with such reverence here.”

The entrance is peppered with other items of interest such as a portrait picture of JRD Tata, elegant teak exhibition tables displaying old photographs of various members of the Tata family with descriptive notes, a wooden wall panel showing the family tree, and a beautiful stained glass inscribed with the words ‘*Humata, Hukhta, Hvarshata*’, which translates as good thoughts, good words, good deeds respectively. The archives provides a glimpse of history to diverse visitors — from students and trainees to management executives, scholars and historians.

There is a wealth of information to access because JRD was a man who had an innate sense of history; he maintained a record of everything, even his school timetable. There is a copy of a letter written by father Ratan Dadabhoj Tata to a young Jehangir counselling him and praising him with warm words. The tone of the letter reveals just how close-knit the family was and the immense respect young JRD had for his father. There are nearly 60,000 letters that include JRD’s correspondence with colleagues, business associates, government personnel, friends and some of India’s and the world’s most prominent people.

On exhibit also are the prestigious awards he received in his lifetime — the Bharat Ratna, the UN Population Award, Knight Commanders Cross of the Federal

Republic of Germany, Legion of Honour and the Daniel Guggenheim Medal. The tour de force is JRD’s office, brilliantly re-constructed complete with a replica of the wall map that was mounted behind his desk (one of the few issued at the time to private individuals by the Government of India) and other memorabilia — custom-made engineering tools, each piece unique in purpose and deeply cherished by JRD during his time.

Besides an intimate look into JRD’s life and times, the place resonates with more images from the Tata past — oil paintings and furniture recovered and restored from the homes of various members of the Tata family and volumes of information and memorabilia on Tata group history. TCA has also organised grand exhibitions showcasing business, public and community initiatives of the group and glimpses of Tata personalities. Some of the exhibitions hosted so far are — Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata: Founder of the House of Tata, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and its philanthropic institutions, JRD Tata: The man who touched power but remained untouched by it, Images of greatness: A tribute to the three personalities - JN Tata, JRD Tata and Naval Tata, and From rail to road: The story of Tata Motors.

### Custodians of the past

Ms Sasidharan has been with the archives for a year now and brings with her a fresh outlook and enthusiasm that carried her through her previous stint at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. But she attributes much of her initial experience and joy in archiving to the time when she was part of the team that restored the Chowmahalla Palace of the Nizams of Hyderabad. “In India archiving is in a nascent stage hence there are few experienced hands. You have to be more hands-on here and you’ll find yourself wearing many hats. Archive professionals abroad are amazed at the variety of work we handle.”



The TCA team: (clockwise from top left) Freney Shroff, Hasan Sayyed, RP Narla, Sohail Sayyed, Nawzar Lala, Ibrahim Shaikh, Mohammed Rafiq and Deepthi Sasidharan

Another person with plenty of headgear is TCA's assistant archivist Freny Shroff who has been with the archives since 1998, and with the Tatas for two decades prior to that. She is fierce in her commitment to TCA's mission and doesn't waste time spelling it out, "Remember, we are the custodians but we will only have as much information as is given to us. People in the organisation should get actively involved and send relevant data on their organisations."

If the material doesn't come to the archives, the archives will go looking for it. That's RP Narla's role as he travels to Tata companies collecting information for the archives. Nawzer Lala is in charge of information technology and in this digital age, his responsibility is considerable. He's got records, images and audio-visual material to plough through for digitising. Ms Sasidharan and her team are constantly trying to improve turnaround time for responses to queries for information. Says Ms Sasidharan, "Because history is just that important. We are the only organisation that gets to understand the character of the people."

### Taking the past forward

The archives though run on a non-profit basis, does not lag behind the times. India's first ISO certified business archive, TCA started with just one server, but now has three. And plans to go up to six servers to handle the ever-increasing volume of digitised data that includes images and audio-visual material.

The archive is also in the process of sourcing collection management software from Europe used for documentation, tracking and retrieval of records. But more important is the care and maintenance of archival material such as eliminating or minimising conditions damaging to the archival material — careless handling, poor environment conditions, inappropriate storage — and framing and cleaning. The repositories have a controlled environment and a special fire-fighting system called Clean Agent that dispels a fire extinguishing gas instead of water or chemicals that are potentially damaging to archive material.

TCA has recovered and restored old newspaper clippings, letters and documents through various intricate conservation methods. A portrait of Sir Ratan Tata, dated 1921 and painted by the famous artist MF Pithawala was recovered from the Tata property 'Homestead' at Matheran. The painting was covered with dust, dirt and fungus and the original image was barely visible. The efforts of TCA's conservator now reveal a stunning portrait of a pensive Sir Ratan Tata.



Visitors going through the exhibits

### Keeping the memory alive

TCA's task of preserving the past is in no way a simple one. As Ms Sasidharan explains, "The average Indian does not even maintain a journal on his own life and day. Our efforts at archiving the past are frugal at best." What is needed is a collective consciousness of the need to preserve history. She adds, "Each time a piece of history comes the way of Chairman Ratan Tata, he promptly sends it to our offices. The more information that is sent to us the more history we will be able to weave together for the time when the group needs it."

The tremendous efforts that the TCA team puts in is validated every time they hear visitors say, "I am really proud to be a part of the Tata legacy; I had no clue that there was so much history." But there is and it's all there to be discovered at the Tata Central Archives. ●

*Christina Fernandes*