

The ECAI South Asia Team: Why Australia?

**John McGuire, Maggie Exon and Lynne Vautier
Curtin University of Technology
Australia**

That South Asia is an important area for ECAI needs little emphasis from us. With a population which may within a relatively short time eclipse that of China, India alone must be seen as a source of vast amounts of information, much of which is very vulnerable. The area is taken by ECAI South Asia to encompass India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. The total population of this area is more than one billion people (approximately 1,312,000,000). (CIA, 1999)

In 1997, a group of South Asia experts from Australia, mostly librarians, visited India and Bangladesh as part of a large research project which will be discussed in detail later in this paper. The purpose of the visit was to make contact with important information-related institutions and individuals in these countries, assess the problems faced by these institutions and identify information sources that should be made more widely available to the outside world. The most important impression which resulted from this visit from our point of view was the enormous variability in the standard of care of materials important to South Asian research. The great scientific institutions in India match any in the world with excellent, well-maintained libraries and good computing and telecommunication access. By contrast, some of the institutions responsible for safeguarding Indian history and cultural heritage were woefully under funded and lacking suitable premises and other infrastructure to ensure that material is not lost. In addition, the bureaucratic hurdles placed in the way of, for example, visiting scholars using the National Archives of India, can be formidable. Other countries in the region display the same problems.

Nevertheless it is clear that local and visiting scholars are extensively using a range of archives and libraries and discovering in them often completely unexploited treasures. The research materials and databases created by such scholars are not easily available and mechanisms to collect and preserve it are not widespread. The visit was enough for the two authors of this paper who participated to appreciate that there might well be a part which Australia could play in cooperating with South Asian individuals and institutions to help them safeguard and make available scholarly information. The result has been the appointment of an Australian team as editors of ECAI South Asia.

Why Australia?

Some members of the audience here will have been at the ECAI meeting in June 1999 at the University of Michigan and will be familiar with the proposal which was approved there that the South Asia Editorial Team should be based at Curtin University and La Trobe University in Australia. For those of you who were not, the idea that the South Asia team should be based in Australia may seem to be rather strange.

The immediate genesis of this was a project to improve access to South Asian materials within Australia itself. It was supported by a substantial research infrastructure grant and was to be conducted through a consortium of Australian universities. The project, called *South Asia: Renovating the National Collection*, consisted of a database of Australian holdings of print, archive and other materials (South Asia Resources Database, 1999) and an acquisition program to try to boost holdings of important sources, in particular newspapers and serials. It was as part of this acquisition program that a group of Australian librarians visited India and Bangladesh for a month. The whole project reflected a move to enhance ties with all Australia's South Asian neighbours. As the main consortium partner on the Indian Ocean coast of Australia and as a university with established South Asian scholars, Curtin was a natural leader of this project.

Australian holdings of South Asian material are, in fact, quite good and the database has proved to be of use to scholars elsewhere in the world. Unfortunately, there have been difficulties in keeping it up to date. The National Library of Australia, source of many of the records through its *Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN)* database, was not able to continue to supply records because of a major system upgrade that had lengthy teething problems. Only recently has the new system, *Kinetica*, begun to be reasonably robust, making it possible for National Library staff to contemplate returning to projects like this. However, an attempt is being made to update the database through direct transfer of records from libraries and archives to the database at Curtin.

Among the most exciting of the possibilities offered by the project was that of identifying and describing sources which were held in a major institution but were not catalogued or described and also identifying sources held outside major institutions, such as scholar's working papers anywhere. In the event, there was little time to work on the latter, but a good deal of new cataloguing of institutional materials was undertaken, showing that, even in a country like Australia, the wealth of uncatalogued material was of great importance. On the visit to India and Bangladesh, the scale of the problem of uncatalogued materials in South Asian collections was also abundantly clear.

The project described above was reported to an ECAI meeting in Taiwan and this led to the involvement of Curtin in ECAI in general without any specific South Asia focus. However, the experience of the Australian team in dealing with the problems of identifying materials and its contacts both with South Asia and internationally led to the proposal that the South Asia editorial team could take advantage of the expertise developed during the earlier project and assume responsibility for editing the South Asian component of ECAI.

The activities of our editing group are grounded on a number of important principles.

1. Although we see ECAI South Asia as a natural continuation of previous projects, it is desirable that the editorial team should eventually be led from South Asia, with continuing Australian input and support.
2. ECAI South Asia should be an international project taking in scholars from all over the world. One of its most important tasks will be to identify these people, set up good communication links and ensure the greatest possible co-operation from the important institutions with collections in the field. The editorial team, however, will be relatively small and will remain, at least at the beginning, geographically localised. Despite the obvious possibilities of electronic communication, we have found it of great importance in the planning stages of the project to get together in one room and nut out our problems. The value of this is demonstrated by this meeting here at Berkeley. We see the editorial team as administrative rather than academic in these initial stages and therefore most of the work will be undertaken by librarians responsible for the South Asia area, whose expertise in the building of databases and catalogues, in identifying materials and acquiring them will be invaluable.
3. ECAI South Asia will urgently develop a strategic plan, an important element of which will be policies that determine what datasets are potentially the responsibility of ECAI.

Initial phase of project

ECAI South Asia contacts include those with government departments, academic institutions, private companies and individuals within South Asia as well as South Asianists in Australia and overseas. There is an existing directory of South Asian

scholars in Australia available through SouthAsiaNet (National Centre for South Asian Studies, 1998). We will use this and other known contacts to request registration of content that is of interest to the project, using the metadata clearing house.

The same contacts will be used to disseminate information about ECAI South Asia and as a source of expertise in various aspects of the project. One of the aims of this is to work towards passing the responsibility for the project to South Asia.

We have already decided to concentrate on the following subject areas: humanities, social sciences, economics, demographics, art, history and archaeology.

Indicators of our success after the first two years of the project will be:

1. a significant number of data sets had been identified and have attached expressions of cooperation from the dataset holders;
2. work is in progress on geo-coding data that is suitable for this treatment;
3. some base maps will have been identified and progress made on copyright clearance for use by the project.

Types of information which are a priority of ECAI South Asia

The development of a strategic plan for ECAI South Asia will involve prioritisation of the types of information that we will attempt to identify. This will probably be based on giving priority to:

1. information which is already in electronic form;
2. quality datasets which contain information which has been enhanced by research and scholarly input;
3. datasets developed by individuals rather than institutions;
4. datasets which at present are not available to the wider scholarly community and which may never be, in particular those which are likely to be discarded after the death or retirement of a scholar;
5. information which is judged to be the most vulnerable.

ECAI South Asia does not intend to become involved in the cataloguing of uncatalogued institutional collections in South Asia or large-scale data conversion to electronic format.

It must be accepted that there is little likelihood that standard and uniform data can be provided for all areas within the region. The coverage in some area will be patchy at best. We will take advantage of what is available and make it accessible. Beyond that, we feel that ECAI cannot at present have a large role in data generation.

Funding

One of the most important tasks of the South Asia team, as with any other, is finding sources of funding. This is a very difficult task. Sources in South Asia are not very hopeful, in view of the funding shortages. However, there are possibilities with some academic institutions with which we already have contacts such as the University of Bombay and the Indian Institutes of Technology. Co-operation between the latter and Curtin is already being canvassed and ECAI may well be able to take advantage of this. Inevitably, most of the possibilities are in India. Pakistan, in particular, is likely to remain virtually untouched for some time. On the other hand, Bangladeshi scholars appear open to projects like this, but are very poorly funded indeed.

Bangladesh is the focus of a number of international and national aid organisations which are also active in other countries in the region. One of their avenues of activity is supporting the development of higher education and research in these countries. We will be pursuing these possibilities.

The range of Australian sources of funding is very limited. Australia does not have a tradition of philanthropic foundations, and there is no wide range of government sources for research in the humanities. The previous grant for *South Asia: Renovating the National Collection* was a infrastructure grant specifically designed to improve research infrastructure within Australia and an international project will have to be very carefully presented to have access to this source of funds. Australian Research Council (ARC) research grants are usually for specific discrete projects. An early priority will be to identify such discrete elements of ECAI South Asia that may appeal to the ARC assessors.

One scheme that looks likely to produce some funding involves collaboration between the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) and its equivalent in India.

Mapping

It may seem that we have forgotten that ECAI is the Electronic Cultural ATLAS project. Much of the material which we are concerned with and which we feel needs description and preservation are resources which are not geo-referenced nor are they linked to geographic locations smaller than major administrative units. However, there is material, such as that collected by Professor Peter Reeves on Bengal fisheries, which is susceptible to geo-referencing, even though it is not available in this form at present.

There are potential problems for ECAI South Asia in the area of identifying cartographic resources. We anticipate that the identification, acquisition and copyright clearance of electronic base maps will be complicated, at least in the case of India, because the government has a long-standing policy of restricting access to cartographic information about seaports, airports, coastal and border areas. A number of borders in the region are in dispute and other areas are remote and not well mapped.

We are aware that the current proposed editorial team for South Asia does not contain any mapping experts and we will be looking to add this expertise as soon as possible. In any case we believe that mapping should not be our first priority. This should not be taken to imply that we do not take the atlas aspect of ECAI seriously. However, as was explained above, there are many serious problems to be solved in this area before a wide body of original data about South Asia becomes available to ECAI. Contacts, funding and the identification of sources will be needed first before these technical problems of mapping the region will become pressing. In the meantime, however, we are undertaking the following tasks.

1. Identify sources and availability of printed maps of the region.
2. Determine the ownership of copyright in the cartographic data on which the maps are based.
3. Identify government restrictions on access to cartographic data.
4. Identify sources of digital maps and their availability, including both raster images and vector-based maps.

On the basis of this information, decisions will be made about the possible necessity of producing base maps specifically for ECAI.

The development of geo-coding systems for the area is another task that will need to be undertaken. We are aware that the possibilities of this have been central to debates about how ECAI should handle data and will look to resources within ECAI for help on this. We intend to experiment with geo-coding and geo-referencing using a dataset which we own, the *Guide to Selected Indian and Bangladesh Library and Information Resources* (Guide, 1998).

Links

One of the major concerns we have is that we should identify and set up links with projects that overlap with ECAI South Asia. We do not wish to re-invent the wheel or set up systems incompatible with those of others. One major project we have identified so far is the Digital South Asia Library (Digital South Asia Library, 1999), which is a pilot project of the University of Chicago and Columbia University and is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. One of their stated future plans is the preparation of digital cartographic files for the area and they list other activities which could have an impact on ECAI. However, it is clear that this project is heavily library-based and it will not concentrate on the kinds of datasets that are the major focus of ECAI.

The relationship of ECAI South Asia with such projects is only one of a number of different kinds of relationships with external information providers that ECAI might have. At present we have identified four different categories that will each need to be treated in the appropriate way.

1. Projects which have as their basic aim to identify catalogue and provide access to external data. These projects will have aims very similar to those of ECAI and the greatest possible co-operation between us will be needed. These projects will typically not just provide access to data but will also be developing systems for the storage, display and manipulation of data by end users.
2. Projects which have gathered together an extensive amount of data that is commercial or otherwise subject to copyright and cannot in any sense be controlled or influenced by ECAI. The extent to which ECAI should incorporate a large number of such links is doubtful, as is the question of whether they should be included on the metadata clearing house.

3. Datasets which can be made available to ECAI users but which creators prefer to keep under their own control and ownership and which will be stored outside the ECAI system.
4. Datasets that may be fully transferred to ECAI for storage and access purposes although not necessarily with full transfer of ownership.

References

CIA (1999). Central Intelligence Agency. *World factbook 1999*. Available at <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>. Accessed 3 January 2000

Digital South Asia Library (1999): a pilot project.

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/southasia/dsal.html>. Accessed 3 January 2000

Guide (1998). *A Guide to Selected Indian and Bangladesh Library and Information Resources*, edited by Ian Dawes and Lynne Vautier. Available at <http://www.nla.gov.au/southasia/report.html>. Accessed 3 January 2000.

National Centre for South Asian Studies (1998). *Australia-India Directory: Australian academic links*. <http://www.une.edu.au/~arts/SouthAsiaNet/listal.htm>.

South Asia Resources Database (1999). <http://recall.curtin.edu.au/data/saru/sard.htm>. Accessed 3 January 2000.