

An LVPEI Archive

In 1986, on a bright and sunny October 17th, the foundation stone for LVPEI was laid on a rocky stretch of land at Road No. 2, Banjara Hills. Among those present at the ceremony were the then Chief Minister of a united Andhra Pradesh, the late N T Rama Rao; a union minister, the late Sushil Kumar Shinde; and the late Mr. L V Prasad himself. A handful of people who witnessed that momentous day are still with us today. But for most at LVPEI, it lives on through a set of iconic photographs. In them, Shri N T Rama Rao stands strikingly dressed as Swami Vivekananda, in flowing saffron vestments. Around him, in crisp white attire, are Shri Shinde, Shri L V Prasad, Dr Nag Rao and others—all gathered around the marble foundation stone that marked the beginning of a dream. A few mementos remain: an invitation card from that day, some letters, and a few records. Are they enough to capture the spirit of that day? Perhaps not fully. But they remind us of where we began—and how far we've come.

Much of LVPEI's history—our work in eye care, research, innovation, education, rehabilitation, eye banking and community eye care—is quietly tucked away in time. Many of today's breakthroughs, such as advances in stem cell therapy for the cornea or treatments for retinal disorders, are deeply rooted in decades of sustained effort and innovation. Scattered across our journey are souvenirs, photographs, videos, letters, emails, patient stories, and groundbreaking collaborations. Often overlooked as mundane details once the outcome is celebrated, these fragments are, in fact, *desiderata*—the essential and irreplaceable elements of the LVPEI narrative. Individually, each may seem fleeting or trivial, but collectively, they form a rich mosaic of our legacy—one that deserves to be preserved and remembered.

How we think of these objects, documents, and memories is key to telling the LVPEI story. This is LVPEI's 38th year of existence; soon, we will be marking 40 years. The founding set of individuals have handed over the reins of leadership to us, the senior leadership group and me. Over the years, we have shared the LVPEI story at many fora and in many forms. Yet, what we lack is a systematic record of the decisions, actions, and reflections that truly defines who we are.

Encouraged by the guidance of our board and well-wishers, we've begun to recognize the value of building a formal archive for LVPEI—one that will preserve not just our milestones, but also the moments in between.

An Archive Workshop

This month, we hosted an intense, two-day, Archive Planning Workshop for our senior executives. The workshop was led by the *Milli Collective*, a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering and supporting archival initiatives across India. Milli brought together an exceptional group of experts, including the heads of Archives at NCBS, and IIT Madras, a former head of the SBI Archives in Kolkata, and other resource persons. The goal was ambitious: to explore how best to preserve, catalogue, and make accessible – both to the world, and to future generations - the rich and layered histories of LVPEI.

Over the course of two days, we delved into the process of sourcing material, the formal acquisition protocols, archival appraisal, sorting, annotation and methods of access. We realized that two extremes, sentimental nostalgia and cold indifference, both are not ideal for this delicate task. To assess an object's archival value, we must maintain enough distance for clarity, yet stay close enough to recognize its context and significance. We also confronted the complexities of physical archiving in the digital age. As our work increasingly moves to email and WhatsApp - even for critical decision making - how do we ensure that this digital context is preserved meaningfully? Questions of ethics and legal frameworks also surfaced, especially in relation to individual and data privacy when archiving material for public access.

Tejah Balantrapu, one of our staff who attended the workshop, had this to say: "The workshop was an eye-opening experience, both exciting and daunting. What gave me comfort, and a sense of possibility, was the shared experience and passion of this group of Archivists. They spoke about harnessing each object's valence as a tool for memory and enquiry. I look forward to seeing how we can take this forward at LVPEI."

We are deeply grateful to the Milli Collective for their time, insight, and guidance. This workshop marks an important beginning in our journey to create an enduring archive for LVPEI.

Imagining an LVPEI Archive

Last month, I spent a day at the 'Archives at NCBS,' part of the National Centre for the Biological Sciences in Bengaluru. This unique and creative institution is dedicated to documenting the history of science in India. It is a true, multimodal archive, preserving photographs, photo negatives, audio, video and paper material in a thoughtfully designed and ultra-modern facility.

The visit made me reflect: What should LVPEI's institutional ambition be for an archive?

Our story is not just about buildings or achievements. It's about the collective hopes, efforts, and dreams of everyone who believes in the LVPEI vision. It includes oral testimonies, photographs from events and conferences, also the informal and everyday moments. It includes the letters our patients write to us, the decisions we make, the awards we receive, and even the grant applications we submit.

The possibilities, I believe, are vast and inspiring.

As we approach the milestone of four decades and begin to step into our fifth, it is time to consider how we can systematically reflect on our past—how we can preserve, digest, and draw meaning from these memories. Our hope is that many from the LVPEI family will come forward to share their stories, and in doing so, help us shape an archive that truly reflects the depth and diversity of our journey.

-Prashant Garg