

# Barriers to Knowledge: Challenges of Archival Accessibility in Scholarly Research

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*Archives serve as custodians of history, safeguarding invaluable records that shape academic discourse, legal frameworks, and public memory. For scholars, access to these archives is essential for conducting rigorous research and constructing narratives that are grounded in primary sources. However, the very institutions tasked with preserving and facilitating knowledge often impose significant barriers that hinder scholarly enquiry. This paper critically examines the challenges scholars encounter when navigating archival institutions, with a particular focus on accessibility. Drawing from my own experience as a researcher at the National Archives, I explore the obstacles that complicate archival research and reflect on the resilience and adaptability required to overcome them.*

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## What Does It Take to Be a Scholar?

Becoming one requires dedication, intellectual curiosity, and a strong drive to explore new ideas while challenging existing knowledge. Most scholars pursue higher education, such as a master's or doctoral degree, to gain expertise in a specific field. Strong research skills, including data collection, analysis, and synthesis, are essential for producing original work. However, one significant challenge that scholars face is accessing archives, which are essential for pursuing historical knowledge. Archives serve as the repository of historical treasures by preserving essential documents, manuscripts, and records. Beyond mere storage, they meticulously organise materials to

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safeguard historical narratives.<sup>1</sup> They play a crucial role in cataloguing, preserving, and facilitating access to these records, ensuring that the stories of the past remain available for future generations.

As a Master's student, I believe that producing academic papers, articles, and books is a fundamental aspect of scholarship. Writing high-quality papers, supported by rigorous research and clear argumentation, helps refine ideas and broaden intellectual horizons. One of the most prominent institutions for researchers is the National Archives of India, the largest archival repository in South Asia. It serves as the custodian of government records of enduring value, including public records, private papers, and more, making it an invaluable resource for scholars. Established in 1891 in Calcutta as the Imperial Record Department, it serves as the Central Record Office of the Government of India. Initially, it was envisioned to include a Central Library to support various departmental libraries. Over time, it evolved into a research-oriented library, offering extensive resources to scholars, trainees, and government agencies. It houses over 1.9 lakh publications, including rare books, reports, parliamentary papers, monographs, gazettes, journals, and newspapers, covering diverse subjects such as history, politics, culture, economics, social sciences, and tribal studies.<sup>2</sup> However, despite their significance, national archives of India often present challenges that hinder their effectiveness as research institutions.

### **Reflections on my Experience as a Scholar at the National Archives**

While working on my seminar paper about the history of Partition, I chose to emphasise women's citizenship, tracing its legal framework, gender biases, and the entanglement of religion. To substantiate my research, I needed access to primary sources, many of which were housed in the National Archives of India. However, my experience with searching for documents there highlights numerous challenges that hindered the research process.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Ashikuzzaman, "What's an Archives? : Definition, Types, Importance," *Library & Information Science Education Network*, last modified May 22, 2025, <https://www.lisedunetwork.com/archives/>.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives of India, "Library," accessed March 30, 2025, <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/national-archives-of-india-library>.

To access archival documents, one must be a bona fide research scholar. Prior to this, I had never worked with primary sources, and I was unaware that research took place in a separate Research Room, requiring prior registration via email. When I first visited the archives, I encountered strict security measures, and entry required an entry slip from the reception. Obtaining this pass was a cumbersome, daily procedure and had to be requested via email for each visit. Once inside, scholars must register at the Research Room and obtain a registration slip to access the library. They must also record their name, address, and time of entry in a register at the entrance of the Library Reading Room. The Research Room operates Monday to Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and remains closed on weekends and government holidays. This time restriction posed a significant challenge for me and my colleagues, as it often disrupted the flow of our research.

Another major challenge was accessing the required files. I was informed by the assigned authority that I could requisition fifteen files per day via email. If the files were available, I would be notified and required to visit the archives again to submit a handwritten requisition form. Following submission, I had to wait for a week before I could physically access the files. While filling out the pro forma (file requisition form), I encountered difficulty in identifying the branch/section of certain files. For instance, *The Index to the Proceedings of the Ministry of External Affairs* typically refers to an official archival or government-issued publication that catalogues and summarises internal discussions, decisions, correspondence, or communications made by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India.

Unlike other files, this one did not have the branch mentioned on the first page. Seeking help from the assigned authority did not resolve the issue, as even they were unable to determine the correct branch, leaving me waiting for one to two days for confirmation from the repository. Libraries and archives rely substantially on these designated individuals, who often carry out important tasks like retrieving the files for researchers. Despite this, they receive very little training and are dependent on their superiors,<sup>3</sup> which not only hinders the researcher's momentum but also limits their skills and growth opportunities.

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<sup>3</sup> Dinyar Patel, "India's Troubled Archives and Libraries," *Dinyar Patel* (blog), March 27, 2012, <https://dinyarpatel.com/2012/03/27/indias-troubled-archives-and-libraries/>.

Furthermore, I was told that, although there is a provision for requisitioning files, it does not guarantee that I would receive all the requested documents. In fact, I was informed that out of fifteen requisitioned files, I might receive only two or three, which was a shocking revelation. This made me question how such a distinguished institution, with access to extensive resources and government support, could have such shortcomings. The Public Records Act of 1993 requires all government offices to maintain their records properly (as stated in Clause 2 of the Act).<sup>4</sup> Under this Act, institutions like the National Archives of India, the National Mission for Manuscripts, and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library are actively participating in protecting public records.<sup>5</sup> The law prohibits the unauthorised destruction of public records, with violations punishable by imprisonment, fines, or both.<sup>6</sup> The Act sets out procedures for the destruction or disposal of public records once they are no longer considered useful.<sup>7</sup>

As the National Archives of India (NAI) completes 125 years, it is important to note that many important documents are still not properly organised. These include six lakhs (600,000) documents related to the pensions of freedom fighters, ten lakhs (1 million) files on post-Partition immigrants from Pakistan, a large collection of military records, and records from the Archaeological Survey of India. These documents are crucial for further research on these historical themes.<sup>8</sup> Archives preserve not only historical documents but also government records, which are vital for maintaining accountability and transparency, as they allow one to scrutinise decisions made by the government.<sup>9</sup> The lack of proper record-keeping is a major problem in India.

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<sup>4</sup> Government of India, *The Public Records Act, 1993* (New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice), accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1921?locale=en>.

<sup>5</sup> Shilpi Rajpal, "Experiencing the Indian Archives," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 16 (April 2012): 19–21.

<sup>6</sup> Rajpal, "Experiencing the Indian Archives," 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Sana Aziz, "National Archives of India: The Colonisation of Knowledge and Politics of Preservation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 50 (December 2017): 33–39.

<sup>9</sup> Ashikuzzaman, "What's an Archives?"

It prevents researchers from studying modern history and reduces government accountability.<sup>10</sup>

Requisition for records	
विद्वान का नाम/Name of Scholar:	
दस्तावेज़/विषय का विवरण/Particulars of the Documents:	
विभाग/Department:	
शाखा/Branch:	
दिनांक/वर्ष/Date/Month/Year of Document:	
दस्तावेज संख्या/Ref.No.:	
Signature and Date	

**Form 1:** Showing the particulars required to be filled to access a certain file/ Requisition Form, NAI

Despite multiple visits, hours spent searching for relevant files, and numerous requisition requests, my efforts were fruitless. Over a period of two months, I requisitioned around thirty to forty-five files but received none, as they were either unavailable or undergoing digitisation. All the requisitions were rejected via email, stating: ‘With reference to your request for files, it is informed that none of the fifteen requested files are available. All files are marked as N.T. or under digital scanning.’ This raised another concern—why would the archives choose to digitise records during peak research months (February to May), when most universities have their dissertation submission deadlines?

Additionally, the digital archive—Abhilekh Patal (<https://www.xn--abhilekhpatal-im6g.in>)—proved to be unreliable due to server issues and frequent crashes, a problem faced by many scholars. This severely hampered my research, as the National Archives was the primary institution for accessing Indian citizenship and abduction records. Presented below is an indicative list of 12 files, out of the 35, I had requisitioned, in their original form.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarth Pillai, “Archives and Archival Consciousness: A Postcolonial Predicament,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 22 (June 2012): 32–34.

Sl. No	Particulars of Documents	Ministry/Department	Branch/ Section/ Series etc	Date/ Year	Part, if any	File no	Concerned repository (To be filled by Research Room Section	Remarks from the Repository: (To be filled by the Repository) Issued, NT, Under-Search, Supplied Before, Brittle etc.
1	Issuance Duplicate Indian Citizenship Certificate to Mrs. Mumtaz Begum w/o Hasan Ibrahim Rajpurkar a Pak National	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26015/191/69 – I.C.	**	**
2	Court Case no. 84 of 1974 – Muruddin Vs. Union of India and Others (West Bengal).	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	19029/12/74 – I.C.	**	**

3	Renunciation Of Indian Citizenship under section 8 (1) of the Indian Citizenship Act 1955 – Case of Miss Kalami Fatemeh	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26020/83/75 – I.C.	**	**
4	Registration as an Indian Citizen under section 5 (1) (c) of the Citizenship Act, 1955 – Smt. Ghazala Zakira Siddiqui w/o @Satiullah Siddiqui (Pak. National)	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26015/176/76 – I.C.	**	**
5	Determination of National status under section 9 (2) of the Indian Citizenship Act 1955 – Mr. Mohammad Nasir	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26021/21/75 – I.C.	**	**
6	Registration as I.C under section 5 (1) (c) of the Citizenship	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26015/77/81 – I.C.	**	**

	Act 1955 – Smt. Basanti Bhupandra Kumar Sachade, Stateless (Gujarat).							
7	Naturalisation as an Indian Citizen under section 6 (1) of the Citizenship Act 1955 – case of (1) – Sh. Alam khan s/o Ahmed Khan and his wife Smt. Khatun Bidi d/o Abdul Rehman, Stateless Nat. (Mhr).	Ministry of Home Affairs North Block	Indian Citizenship Section (I.C)	1969–1984	NO	26018/125/82 – I.C.	**	**
8	Hindu Girls, - An article headed 'Harrowing tale of the abducted – in a Bassah Brothel published in the 'Maratha', an English Weekly of Poona	Govt. of India: Index to the Proceedings of the External Affairs Department for the year 1947	**	1947	NO	23 (7) – AWI.	**	**



9	Annual Reports on Evacuation of non – Muslims for this year 1950–51, 1951–52, 1952–53, 1953–54.	Ministry of External Affairs	Record Management Section	1950–51, 1951–52, 1952–53, 1953–54.		31/2/54 – DHC	**	**
10	Abducted women – Medical aid. – to ___, recovered and kept in camps.	Ministry of External Affairs	(Pak. II)	1949	(PAK II)	100-49/A.P.	**	**
11	Abducted Women – Recovery. – – of — on payment of ransom.	Ministry of External Affairs	(Pak. II)	1949	NO	15-C.A.P.(A.P.)-48.	**	**
12	Abducted Women – Recovery of Abducted Persons. – Non- Muslim__ not to be taken overseas.	Ministry of External Affairs	(Pak. II)	1949	NO	8-C.A.P.(A.P.)-48.	**	**

**Table 1:** Showing the official requisition form from the National Archives, listing the files which were applied to access.

### **Navigating Challenges: Access and Affordability**

The journey of research is often marked by setbacks, limitations, and moments of uncertainty. However, not giving up and choosing resilience in the face of these challenges is, in my view, the true spirit of a scholar. This determination not only reflects one's commitment to academic integrity but also signifies a deep sense of work ethic and purpose. One particularly significant site of research was the Prime Ministers' Museum and Library (formerly known as the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library). Here, I discovered a collection of papers belonging to Mridula Sarabhai, a prominent social and political activist of post-Partition India. These documents proved to be of immense value to my work, particularly in understanding the context and implementation of the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949. In order to support and substantiate the arguments presented in my thesis, it was essential to incorporate detailed case studies. For this purpose, I consulted several legal sources. Among them were the All India Reporter (AIR) Manuals, which are exhaustive compilations of legal statutes, both civil and criminal, complemented by extensive editorial commentary, case annotations, and judicial interpretations. These manuals provided a strong legal framework for my research.

To further strengthen my case analysis, I relied on SCC Online (Supreme Court Cases Online, <https://www.scconline.com>), a sophisticated legal research database that offers comprehensive access to a vast collection of Indian case law, including landmark judgments from the Supreme Court of India, various High Courts, and specialised tribunals. It also includes central and state-level statutes, legislative documents, and regulatory frameworks. However, access to SCC Online comes at a high cost, which often makes it inaccessible to students. Fortunately, I was able to make use of the platform with the help of a friend who is a practising advocate at the Supreme Court of India.

Additionally, I accessed another major legal resource, Manupatra (<https://www.manupatrafast.com>), which is a subscription-based legal research tool widely used in the legal profession and academia. I gained access to this database through my university's institutional login credentials. I must also acknowledge Indian Kanoon (<https://indiankanoon.org>), an open-access digital platform that serves as a popular legal search engine. It provides free

access to court judgments, laws, and legal provisions, and served as an alternative yet significant source during my research. Collectively, these resources were instrumental in bridging the gaps created by the limited access to primary government records, especially due to restrictions and delays in accessing materials from the National Archives of India. By diversifying my sources and creatively navigating access limitations, I was able to maintain the scholarly rigor required for the scope of my research.

In conclusion, I would like to add that, during my last visit to the National Archives, I was informed of a change in the system. Under the new policy, physical files would no longer be provided to scholars. Instead, the available files would be digitised and shared in the form of a pen drive, delaying the research process even more. Additionally, I was told that from that point onwards, only two requisition forms would be allowed per week. My experience at the National Archives was frustrating and unproductive due to bureaucratic delays, limited file availability, rigid procedures, and technological inefficiencies. But can inquisitive scholars, with an ever-probing mind, truly hold themselves back? Perhaps we will never know. With the consistent support and guidance provided by my supervisor, I found alternatives, such as exploring legal cases related to my topic through AIR Manuals, Manupatra, SCC Online, and other resources. At the same time, the National Archive is more than just a repository of old documents, it's a living institution that strengthens the nation's intellectual and historical foundation, making it indispensable to both scholars and society as a whole.

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