

Archival Practice in India through the Lens of Contemporary History Writing

RAJESH KUMAR GUPTA
NLS Law and Society Archives, Bengaluru

This article examines the implementation of archival policies in post-independence India, with a particular focus on the Public Records Act, 1993, and the Public Records Rules, 1997. It investigates how effectively these policies had been implemented in both national and state archives, and how they have continued to influence research and writing on contemporary history. The article also highlights the transitions that have taken place in both governmental and non-governmental archives in India. Until now, most research and historical writings on the relationship between history and archives have been explored largely by historians, who have primarily concentrated on the origin, evolution, theories, critiques, and significance of archives. Having worked for more than six years in institutions such as the National Archives of India, the Department of Delhi Archives, the History Division (Ministry of Defence), and the NLS Law and Society Archives, I have closely observed the functions and challenges of archival institutions. The aim of this article is to uncover the gap between archival laws and policies, and their actual implementation, while also drawing attention to the ongoing transformation of the National Archives of India and analysing the reasons behind the rise of private archives in the last few decades.

Keywords: Contemporary history, National archives, Private archives, Departmental record room, Documentation, State archives

Introduction

Archives are institutions where old government and non-government documents are preserved for administrative use and academic research. Almost every country has its own national archive, which is also considered an integral part of cultural memory and heritage. In India, the National Archives of India¹ (NAI) has a long tradition of safeguarding important and

¹ The National Archives of India (NAI), established in 1891 as the Imperial Record Department in Calcutta and relocated to New Delhi in 1911, is the custodian of the nation's documentary heritage. It preserves central government records, private papers, manuscripts, and cartographic material. To decentralise its functions, NAI has four regional record centres:

rare documents, ranging from the early Mughal period, the colonial era, and post-independence government records, generally dating back thirty years. Alongside the NAI, almost every state has its own archive, often supported by regional branches at the district and divisional levels, where documents related to state governments and local administrations are preserved for future reference and research. These institutions are known by different names across India, such as State Archives, Historical Record Section, Record Office, Regional Record Office, or District Record Office. Most state archives adopt the policies framed by the NAI. This article primarily focuses on the NAI and the implementation of its archival policies, which also serve as a standard for archives at the state/regional-level. Additionally, it examines the policies of the Prime Minister Museum and Library (PMML),² the Department of Delhi Archives (DDA), and the Archives of Contemporary India at Ashoka University (ACI) to understand the broader trends and transitions within archival practices in India, and to explore how these changes affect research and the writing of contemporary history.

Officially, the systematic initiation of modern archives in India goes back to British rule, when the Imperial Record Office was established in Calcutta in 1891.³ However, this does not mean that there was no tradition of keeping archives or documents in ancient and medieval times. The Mughal Empire was also known as the “paper state” because of the abundantly preserved documents and bureaucratic records.⁴ Similarly, in ancient times, inscriptions carved on stones, rocks, caves, and copper plates served as valuable sources

Bhopal (1954), Jaipur (1956), Bhubaneswar (1962), and Pondicherry (1979). These centres store records of their respective regions, with Pondicherry focusing on French records.

² The Prime Minister’s Museum and Library (PMML), is an autonomous institution that comes under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. It was formerly known as the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), and is located at Teen Murti Bhavan, New Delhi. Established in 1966 to honour Jawaharlal Nehru, it served as a premier centre for research on modern Indian history, housing archives, private papers, photographs, and a rich library. In 2022, it was expanded and renamed PMML to showcase the legacies of all Prime Ministers of India.

³ Sabayasachi Bhattacharya, *The British Raj: History of the Archival Policy of the Government of India, with selected documents, 1858-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴ Farahat Hasan, *Paper, Performance the State: Social Change and Political Culture in Mughal India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 103; Also see, Mohammed Ziauddin Ahmad, ed., *Mughal Archives: A Descriptive Catalogue Pertaining to the Reign of Shah Jahan* (Hyderabad: State Archives, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1977), 1-20.

of information about the political and social systems of that period.⁵ Therefore, it can be said that with the emergence of the state, the initial structures of archives also began to develop in different forms. In the modern era, however, the French Revolution played a crucial role in shaping the modern archival system. It emphasised the importance of historical documents and raised awareness among common people, thereby laying the foundation for the modern archive.⁶

It is true that the credit for the modern, systematic structure of archives in India largely goes to the British government. In many ways, the current Indian archival system reflects a colonial legacy, which is why the number of colonial-era documents in both national and state archives remain substantial. Many of these records were curated and classified by British administrators with imperial interests in mind. However, this should not be seen as a matter of criticism. The concerning fact is that, even after more than seventy-nine years of independence, there is a notable scarcity of post-independence documents in India's national and state archives. This reveals a significant gap between the policies intended for historical documentation and the actual realities of archival holdings. A large number of contemporary historical documents are either unavailable in the national or state archives, and those that are accessible often represent only a few files from the complete series. As a result, archives often prove to be nearly unusable for writing contemporary history. My concern lies in this scarcity of contemporary sources in Indian archives, which makes them inadequate for capturing the complexities of contemporary historical writings.

It is widely known that colonial officials largely ignored marginalised voices, inherent in their role as representatives of a colonial government. Nevertheless, the imperial archives continued to be widely celebrated as authentic and objective. This perception has been seriously challenged by many scholars, particularly feminist scholars such as Anjali Arondekar, Charu

⁵ Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age of the 12th Century* (New delhi: Pearson Education, 2008).

⁶ Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archives: A History of Knowledge*, trans. John Noel Dillon (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

Gupta, and Antoinette Burton.⁷ But even after 79 years of independence, leaving aside the voices from below, official records from the post-independence period are still difficult to access in the archives. This raises the question: how can we write a contemporary and inclusive history of independent India? According to the Public Records Act, 1993 (PRA 1993), all records that are at least 30 years old should be made available to researchers. This means that records up to 1995 ought to be accessible, but this is not the case. It seems that the nature of Indian archives has not changed much from the colonial to the post-colonial period.

On the contrary, the nature of research and its methodologies have evolved considerably over the past few decades. Instead of relying on a single source, contemporary research increasingly employs interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on sociology, anthropology, oral traditions, and a wide range of other sources. For example, online reports, newspapers, personal letters and correspondence, audio-visual media, surveys and data collection, as well as information obtained through the Right to Information Act (RTI) since 2005–2006, are all being actively used to address contemporary historical issues.⁸ An important question arises: when adequate material is available online, what is the need to consult official files? To answer this, we must recognise that the role of history goes beyond simply providing information or arranging events in chronological order. Its purpose is to interpret the significance of events within their specific contexts and to uncover the causal factors behind them. Government records and archival documents serve as crucial sources for understanding key events and their complexities. They also prompt us to examine the broader structures, patterns, and forces that shaped these events, thereby opening up new perspectives and interpretations. In this way, official records enable scholars and historians to investigate not only the details of historical developments but also the causation behind historical incidents,

⁷ See the work of Anjali Arondekar, "Without a trace: Sexuality and the Colonial archive," *Journal of the History and Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (2005): 20-24; Charu Gupta "Writing Sex and Sexuality: Archives in Colonial North India" *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 4 (2011): 12-25; Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archives: Women Writing Home, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: OUP, 2003).

⁸ RTI was meant to be a powerful tool for accessing important government or administrative information, but in reality, it often fails to serve its purpose, and obtaining crucial information through it is very difficult. Officials very often do not provide the requested information.

revealing how and why they happened.⁹ Along with this, archives also contribute to the theoretical expansion of research and knowledge. Moreover, the records they preserve provide new information that opens fresh avenues for future research and discussion.

Despite numerous criticisms of archival records, their value persists, as they form the foundation of much of our historical research. However, the real challenge arises when official records, particularly from the 1960s onwards, are not made available for research, despite the presence of laws allowing access to them. The absence of contemporary sources in India's national and state archives raises serious concerns about the mismanagement and implementation of archival policies. To understand the reasons behind this mismanagement, it is essential to trace the journey of records from their creation in the section office to their transfer to the Departmental Record Room (DRR), and ultimately to the archives for permanent preservation.

Archival records can generally be divided into two categories: governmental and non-governmental records. For now, we will focus on the former. The life cycle of government records is central to archives and records management. Every record, once created, passes through distinct stages: current records (in active use), semi-current records, and non-current records. Current and semi-current records are often referred to as classified records, while non-current records are known as declassified records. Archives serve as repositories of these declassified or unclassified records. Current records are created and maintained in the section or office where they originate. These records are actively used for ongoing work, decision-making, and administrative functions. Their retention period generally ranges from one to five years, depending on administrative needs and requirements. The semi-current phase begins once the action on a file has been completed, and it loses its immediate relevance. At this stage, records are transferred from this section to the DRR. They may still be useful for occasional reference, particularly for audits, legal verification, or establishing precedents. As a transitional stage, semi-current records usually remain in this category for five to fifteen years. These files are reviewed periodically according to the categories and rules prescribed in the PRA 1993. Records deemed to lack permanent value are systematically

⁹ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 87-109.

weeded out and destroyed, following the provisions of the PRA 1993 and the Public Records Rules, 1997 (PRR 1997). All declassified public records, over thirty years old, are transferred to the NAI, where they are made accessible to bona fide research scholars in accordance with established archival policies.¹⁰

The journey of records from current to semi-current, and finally to non-current status, represents a systematic process that balances administrative utility with historical preservation. By transferring important documents to the archives, institutions prevent unnecessary accumulation while ensuring that society's documentary heritage is safeguarded. Thus, the management of government records is not merely a bureaucratic routine; it is also a crucial mechanism that links governance, accountability, and collective memory.

To regulate this process, the Government of India enacted the PRA 1993, and the PRR 1997. Prior to the enactment of these laws, archival management in India lacked statutory authority and relied primarily on administrative instructions, with no specific legal framework to govern the creation, retention, or transfer of records to the archives. From the 1960s onwards, the NAI and the Ministry of Education/Culture issued circulars advising departments to transfer non-current records, generally those over 25 years old, to the archives.¹¹

However, it is unfortunate that the regulations established for the smooth operation of the NAI are not being fully implemented, and numerous state archives are similarly neglecting these guidelines. As a result, even after 50-60 years, records related to contemporary times, particularly from the 1960s onwards, are largely not available for research, which is a matter of concern. In the sixth report (relating to the year 1978-79) on the implementation of the Archival Policy Resolution, the director of Archives reported that during 1978-79, in 634 out of the total 740 central ministries/ Departments and other officers which furnished the data had about 16 to 17 lakh of non-current records

¹⁰ "Section 8(1), 8(2)," The Public Records Act, 1993, National Archives of India, accessed August 5, 2025, <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/public-records-act-1993>. See details on the destruction and disposal of Public Records.

¹¹ K.D. Madan, "Governmental Records 'Explosion' How to Contain It", in *Record Management In India: Some Aspects*, ed. S.A.I. Tirmizi (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1981), 12.

awaiting final appraisal. Earlier, some 14.5 lakhs of files had been accessed by the National Archives without final approval. The figure of non-current files awaiting final appraisal in March 1979 thus exceeded 31 lakh (in March 1976, the corresponding figure was 25 lakh). This is a huge figure by any reckoning. The position of semi-current records, on the other hand, is even worse. The 634 agencies, referred to earlier, had in their possession more than 2.8 crore files, 4 lakh registers, 3 lakh charts, 65 lakh cards, in addition to thousands of running ledger accounts, books and other types of records, totalling more than 4 crore of documents tied up in bundles or laying loose. On a rough estimate, 80% of these semi-current records, after a proper review by the records creating agencies themselves, could be disposed of, making room for accommodating fresh accruals of recorded files.¹² It appears that the success of record management in government archives depends largely on the proper functioning of the DRR of the creating agencies, as they serve as the continuous suppliers of declassified files. If this continuity is disrupted, or the DRR fail to function effectively, the entire system of record management will not be able to operate efficiently.

During my work experience in the archives, I spoke with several researchers working on modern and contemporary periods, and they all agreed on a common issue: after 1960, public records became extremely difficult to locate. Occasionally, some records were found, but in a scattered form, with references to previous or subsequent files missing, and other files from the same series inaccessible. To overcome this problem and advance their research, scholars often had to resort to alternative sources. In some cases, certain professors or researchers gained access to the DRR of the creating agency, a space generally restricted to the public, through close contacts with high-ranking officials or leaders. However, this is not an option available to the average or marginalised researcher. Those without political or bureaucratic connections are effectively barred from accessing the DRR of any creating agency.

Theoretically, Section 12(2) of the PRA 1993, states that “any record-creating agency may grant to any person access to any public record in its custody in such manner and subject to such conditions as may be prescribed.”¹³ As the

¹² Ibid., 11-12.

¹³ “Section 12(2),” The Public Records Act, 1993.

law suggests, it is at the discretion of the authority to decide whether to grant access to any scholar. In practice, however, common scholars are usually denied access unless they can provide strong references. In my opinion, and for fostering a research-oriented environment, the DRR should be open to all researchers and scholars for public use without any discrimination.

Many research organisations, agencies, and individual researchers spend significant amounts of time and money collecting their own survey data on topics such as transport, land, health and sanitation, and education. If they had access to municipal, public health, and other government records, they could save both time and resources. Typically, a researcher may collect data for a single year, analyse it, and present their observations. However, if they have access to ten years of historical data from government agencies, they would be able to undertake far more comprehensive analyses and make meaningful comparisons over time. For example, in a recent seminar held at the National Law School of India University on the 'Citizenship, Inequality, and Urban Governance Project', a collaborative initiative between academics in India and Brown University, the presenters highlighted that data collection is a labour-intensive and costly process. Although they aimed to collect data from a large number of cities in India, but constrained by financial limitations, they managed to collect data from only 14 cities, which restricted the scope of their research. Access to 5–10 years of government records would not only facilitate more robust research but also support policy-making, enhancing data transparency in a democratic system.

An important question arises: if records are being created every day, why is there a failure to transfer these records to the archives, even after the relevant department has long since completed its work on the files? One major reason for this are the shortcomings in the appointment process of Records Officers within the record-creating agency, and their style of work. In this context, the PRA 1993 and the PRR 1997 state that every record-creating agency must appoint a Records Officer, who manages the records in the DRR and reviews them periodically, and after appraisal, these records are to be sent to the archives, where they must be preserved for permanent retention as per scientific regulations.¹⁴ Unfortunately, many record-creating agencies have not

¹⁴ "Section 5(1), 5(2), and 6(1)," The Public Record Act, 1993. See details about the Records Officers appointment and responsibility.

appointed Records Officers,¹⁵ and as a result, a large number of these agencies are unable to implement or comply with the provisions of the PRA 1993 and its rules. Despite these legislative measures, there has been no significant paradigm shift in the records management practices followed by record-creating agencies.¹⁶

The question, however, remains unanswered: why, after more than 30 years since the enactment of the PRA 1993, has it not been effectively implemented in record-creating agencies? The implementation of this Act largely depends on the Records Officers of the creating agencies. Currently, many of these appointed Records Officers are neither trained archivists nor have they completed any diploma or certificate courses in archives and records management. When I filed an RTI inquiry asking how many Records Officers had been appointed so far and what the essential qualifications were for this position, I received a response stating that this information was unavailable. Furthermore, it was clarified that Records Officers are not directly appointed but are nominated by the record-creating agency, which typically selects someone who is either a Section Officer or holds a higher position.¹⁷ This situation leads to two key conclusions. First, there is no direct appointment of Records Officers within record-creating agencies. Second, the appointed Record Officers are untrained in archival management skills. Moreover, only those who have qualified through Staff Selection Commission and Combined Graduate Level examinations are appointed as Records Officers, and even then, their tenure is often limited. These officers typically receive only a three-day training program from the archives. Can three days of training be sufficient when obtaining a diploma in archives usually takes about a year, allowing for a thorough understanding of the field's complexities that cannot be learned in just three days?¹⁸

¹⁵ *Cumulative Reports of Director General of Archives on the Implementation of the Public Record Act, 1993 and Public Record Rules, 1997, Inclusive Reports-21st to 24th* (New Delhi: National Archives of India, New Delhi, 2023), 14-25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ RTI application registration No. NAIND/R/T/240020, National Archives of India, October 23, 2024. In this RTI, a request for information about the appointment of Research Officers in Creating Agencies was made.

¹⁸ "Orientation Course for Records Management for Records Officers," National Archives of India, accessed September 12, 2025, <https://nationalarchives.nic.in/record->

Most of the time, due to staff shortages or other reasons, many officials are given the additional charge of serving as Records Officers for the DRR, which they perceive as an extra burden. While these officers may be required to attend a three-day training programme at the archives, this is far from sufficient. After such brief training, they may lack the confidence to ensure that their work is performed correctly and smoothly.

Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that the nominated Records Officer may be transferred to another department after a few years, exacerbating the problem. As a result, records in the DRR do not undergo proper appraisal in a timely manner, nor are they transferred to the archives at the appropriate time. The tasks of appraising files buried in dust, creating inventories of files to be transferred, recording, reviewing, upgrading or downgrading, weeding out, bundling, and sequencing files are labour-intensive procedures. These are practical tasks that require experience, yet officers receive only partial theoretical knowledge during their brief three-day training.

Instead of a nominated officer, the government could recruit a trained archivist as a permanent and skilled Records Officer. This would bring about a revolutionary change. It would not only enhance the mobility and transfer of records from the creating agency's departmental record room to the NAI but also enable the timely review, appraisal, weeding out, upgrading and downgrading of files. The handling of records by archival experts ensures their longevity, as these professionals are trained to understand how records are created, maintained, and assessed, by acknowledging their potential value as evidence, information, and symbols. Moreover, their expertise not only enhances the longevity of records but also helps reduce conservation costs for the archives to a significant extent. In contrast, most departmental record rooms do not adhere to basic archival standards or provide a suitable environment for preservation, such as proper temperature and humidity control. Consequently, when records are stored for 40–50 years without adequate care and later transferred to the NAI, they require extensive maintenance and conservation efforts. However, if records are properly maintained in the DRR and transferred to the NAI immediately after

[management/records-management-rm/orientation-course-records-management-records-officers.](#)

completing the mandatory 25-year retention period, the cost of their maintenance can be reduced.

In a similar context, on 8th March 2017, while working as an Assistant Archivist with the DDA, I was assigned the task of collecting archival records from Tihar Jail in Delhi. For this purpose, I visited the record room of the jail. The condition of the DRR was extremely poor and looked like a badly maintained storeroom instead of a record room. Excessive exposure to heat, frequent temperature fluctuations, high humidity, and rough handling had severely damaged the records. Many valuable and contemporary records, particularly those from the 1970s relating to people imprisoned during the Emergency, had become extremely fragile. The papers were so brittle that even touching them caused pages to break apart.

The record officer in charge of Tihar Jail was not a permanent staff member, had received no formal training in record management, and possessed no knowledge of proper maintenance practices. Some prisoners were helping him to pack the records in sacks and load them into the truck. As a result, a large number of records had deteriorated long before their expected lifespan. Furthermore, proper transfer procedures were not being followed. The records had not undergone appraisal before being sent to us; instead, they had been hastily packed in sacks. Without being able to examine them on-site, I had to transport the records directly to the Delhi Archives. However, upon opening the sacks, I was shocked to find that many documents had already broken into pieces like dust and were beyond conservation. Some records were already destroyed by rats and insects. The key point is that many contemporary records have been lost due to the lack of basic maintenance in the record room and the absence of trained staff in the DRR.

If a document is highly fragile, conservation becomes not only unavoidable but costly as well. The expertise of trained archivists, as a result, becomes indispensable, as they understand the subtle yet critical aspects of record preservation. The level of treatment and conservation, ultimately, depends on the paper's condition. On average, the cost of conserving and laminating one A4-sized sheet ranges from approximately ₹40 to ₹70. Japanese tissue paper is commonly used for lamination in Indian government archives. The price of lamination varies based on the size of the document and several other factors.

For instance, institutions such as the Delhi Archives hire third-party agencies belonging to INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) Odisha for the conservation of the documents. The choice of lamination of the document is also influenced by the cost: starch-free *maida* (refined wheat flour) paste is less expensive but reduces page visibility by about 10–15%, while carboxymethyl cellulose (CMC) provides 100% clarity but is more costly.

Here, the point is that a trained archivist plays a key role in preserving and managing our historical assets, ensuring that they are properly catalogued, maintained, and protected for future generations. In addition, archivists can contribute significantly to the continuous transfer of records from the DRRs to the NAI. However, this does not mean that only archivists are capable of managing records. Individuals with archival experience, particularly those engaged in research and who understand the value of records, can also manage archival materials effectively. On the other hand, those who neither conduct research nor appreciate the importance of historical documents cannot handle records properly. Interestingly, many nominated Records Officers are not even from a humanities background; in some cases, they are simply given the additional charge of managing DRRs. As a result, due to their lack of interest and negligence, proper care and maintenance of records are often ignored.

So far, the NAI has organised training programmes at various regional centres for nominated Records Officers 165 times up to 2023, with the aim of enabling newly appointed individuals to maintain their departmental records.¹⁹ My concern is that, despite the government spending significant amounts of money on three-day training programmes for newly appointed Records Officers, the condition of records in the creating agencies continues to remain poor. Through an RTI, I obtained information that the expenditure for conducting the past ten orientation courses was around ₹9 lakh,²⁰ yet the situation has not improved. What is the purpose of conducting such training if it brings no substantial improvement?

¹⁹ *Cumulative Reports of Director General of Archives*, Inclusive Reports-21st to 24th.

²⁰ RTI application registration No. NAIND/R/E/25/00096, National Archives of India, June 27, 2025. I filed an online RTI request, to obtain information on expenditure on orientation courses conducted for newly appointed Record Officers in Creating Agencies.

Why doesn't the Director General or the Deputy Director of Archives write to the ministries involved, recommending changes in the appointment process and making it compulsory to appoint permanent Records Officers trained in archives and records management? Why doesn't the ministry directly appoint qualified archivists as Records Officers? Requiring a mandatory diploma in records management could significantly mitigate many of these problems. It would not only reduce the heavy expenses currently being incurred on conservation but also ensure proper record management and more effective implementation of the PRA 1993 and PRR 1997 in the DRR of creating agencies.

New Methodological Demands for "Total Archiving" over "Partial Archiving"

Archiving in government institutions is not a neutral act; it reflects choices about what needs to be either preserved or neglected.²¹ In both colonial and postcolonial contexts, national and state archives have largely focused on official and important records. While these records are undoubtedly important and represent the perspective of the state, they, alone, cannot serve as the foundation for research, particularly in the postmodern era, where truth is interpreted in varying degrees. Although private papers and rare collections of manuscripts have found space in government archives, these are primarily limited to documents related to prominent individuals and institutions. This reinforces the elite character of government archives.²² In contrast, the idea of "total archiving" recognises that history is not only about rulers and officials but also about communities, families, and the everyday lives of individuals who shape collective experiences.²³ It emphasises that all forms of records, regardless of their source, should be considered for inclusion in national and state archives if they carry potential historical value.

²¹ Dhiraj Kumar Nite, "Archives, Being and Representation: Studies in the formation and usage of grassroots archives," *Journal of Research Institute for Letters, Arts and Sciences* 6, (October 2018): 575-577.

²² Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1-2 (2002): 1-19.

²³ Laura Millar, "Discharging Our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada." *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 103-146

The idea of “total archiving” democratises memory by allowing multiple perspectives to coexist.²⁴ When the informal sector, where vast records of labour, migration, trade, education, and cultural expressions are generated, is excluded, historians lose the ability to reconstruct a fuller picture of the past. In a diverse country like India, the practice of archiving in government institutions has largely remained partial rather than total. The NAI and state archives primarily collect, preserve, and provide access to government records. However, a vast array of documents, voices, and experiences from across the country remains outside the formal archival system. This form of partial archiving reflects deep systemic limitations.

I agree that total archiving is an expansive philosophy,²⁵ but contrary to archival management in India, particularly in government agencies, it is not the lack of funding or infrastructure that is the issue, but a lack of vision and the management of the funds. Even after the post-colonial era, we continue to follow colonial models of archiving that prioritise bureaucratic control over inclusive representation. Decolonisation of archives in the era of postmodernist society requires a shift towards embracing diverse voices, experiences, and forms of record-keeping. Without acknowledging and incorporating the multiplicity of communities and their ways of preserving memory, we risk reinforcing the monopoly of one dominant narrative over others. True archival reform must begin with a conversation about what, and whose histories, we choose to preserve and why. For example, records related to dominant institutions and elite narratives are often preserved, whereas materials (consisting of either archival documents or artefacts) belonging to marginalised communities, such as Dalits, Adivasis, women, Muslims, regional cultures, linguistic minorities, transgender persons, persons with disabilities, and children, are usually neglected or lost. This gap has led to the emergence of tribal, transgender, women-centred, and people-centred archives and research centres over the last few decades.²⁶ In a similar context,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rebecka Taves Sheffield, “The Emergence, Development, and Survival of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2015), 92-120. While Sheffield’s study focuses on lesbian and gay community archives in Canada, her analysis reinforces the understanding of total archiving as an expansive philosophy that seeks to include marginalised communities and diverse forms of lived experience within the archival record.

²⁶ Bhasha Archives (Gujarat), Tribal Research and Cultural Institute (Tripura), QAMARA Archives (Bangalore), People’s Archives of Rural India (PARI Online archives),

Prof. Nite uses the term “grassroots archives” to represent these marginal archives, which challenge the dominant archives by offering alternative narrative frameworks for marginalised voices, providing counter-archives.²⁷ The creation of these archives should not be viewed merely as supplementary to mainstream archives; rather, they represent a form of resistance against state-sponsored archival practices. They are not only safeguarding their own cultures, but also directly contributing to research on marginalised communities and supporting informed policy-making.

Therefore, archival practices in government archives often focus on state-centred official documentation, which also creates an archival gap. In contemporary times, the informal sector continues to produce a vast volume of documents, yet most of these are excluded from national archives. On the contrary, the idea of total archiving would require inclusive policies that recognise the value of local records, private collections, community archives, and alternative media such as oral, visual, and audio sources, literature and non-literary creations, periodicals, comics, calendars, cartoons, rare magazines, adult and erotic literature, flyers, posters, paintings, and more. Preserving these diverse materials is essential for research, especially since many rare books, magazines, comics, and story collections ceased to be published long ago. While some academicians, writers, editors, and individual collectors have preserved them, their limited resources often prevent proper conservation, and many are willing to donate them to public repositories. Unfortunately, government and semi-government archives, museums, and agencies usually do not accept such materials.²⁸ As a result, we have already lost a significant number of rare collections and artefacts.

Hathi Trust Digital Library, Marwari Library (New Delhi), Premchand Archives (New Delhi), Law and Society Archives (Bangalore), along with many other informal, private, trust-based archives and museums, are in their own ways attempting to fill this void.

²⁷ Nite, “Archives, Being and Representation,” 575-577.

²⁸ RTI Application Registration No. NMMAL/A/E/25/00002, Prime Ministers’ Museum and Library, July 31, 2025. I filed an online RTI, to seek clarification on the policy of NMML regarding the criteria for accepting or rejecting donors’ collections. However, I did not receive a satisfactory response.

Critiquing the National Archives

During my research, I interacted with a number of scholars from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, and other universities who were working on postcolonial themes. They unanimously agreed and repeatedly complained that archival records related to the post-1960s period were extremely scarce. This resulted in serious difficulties for their research. In 2021–2022, during my own PhD research, I visited the NAI to study the records of the Education Department related to the post-independence period. However, I found very few records available from 1960 onwards.

More recently, I spent considerable time exploring Abhilekh Patal to examine NAI's digitised files. The platform classifies records into three categories: 1. Microfilms, 2. Private Papers, 3. Public Records. Using the advanced search options available on Abhilekh Patal (<https://www.abhilekh-patal.in/>), I focused on exploring Public Records, as all official files have been maintained in this category. I aimed to determine the number of records related to the post-independence period that are accessible to researchers on the portal. Initially, I was pleased to find a substantial number of records available from the post-independence era.

Table 1: Public Records (1950 onwards) available on Abhilekh Patal.²⁹

Serial No.	Year	Number of Records
1.	1950-1960	819718
2.	1961-1970	292023
3.	1971-1980	111673
4.	1981-1990	81225
5.	1991-2000	35100
6.	2001-2010	5475
7.	2011-2020	261
8.	2021-2025	252

²⁹ "Abhilekh Patal," National Archives of India, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.abhilekh-patal.in/>.

However, my satisfaction rapidly transformed into dismay upon examining the files mentioned in the above table, as I found that much of the metadata was erroneous. As an archivist, one can easily determine the year of a file merely by seeing its file number.³⁰ For instance, when I view a file that appears to belong to 1978, in reality, that file belongs to 1954.³¹ I inspected numerous files and noted that the years indicated in the portal were predominantly inaccurate. The person responsible for collating the metadata had filled in the appraisal year of the file incorrectly; the opening years of the files should have been mentioned there. This is reflective of the negligence of the National Archives authority. Regular appraisal is an essential part of the files in the DRR, and after the appraisal, the year of appraisal and signature of the officer are mentioned at the bottom of the file. The table presented above shows that an adequate collection of files is available, but in reality, the years were wrongly mentioned in the metadata.

Moreover, several inaccuracies exist within the table. According to the PRA 1993 and PRR 1997, the National Archives must facilitate 30-year-old records to research scholars. But as the table shows, the Abhilekh Patal portal of the NAI provides records till 2025. This is a violation of archival regulations and statutes. As I delved deeper into the records, it became evident that either erroneous data had been entered or there had been a misunderstanding in the input process. Consequently, the portal presents a greater visibility of records dating from the post-1960 period, a pattern that does not correspond to the overall composition of the archival holdings.

The NAI currently lacks a dedicated research and development wing for the efficient and cost-effective management of records. Many essential materials and equipment, such as scanners, microfilm readers, Japanese tissue paper, and other archival supplies commonly used across India, are not manufactured domestically, which significantly increases the costs of conservation and record management. Moreover, the National Archives does not offer regular fellowship opportunities for research scholars in archival studies, which could otherwise play a crucial role in addressing institutional

³⁰ *Central Secretariat Manual of office procedure*, See chapter on file numbering system.

³¹ File No. 104-IF-7954, "Application Under Section 47 of the Act: Settlement of the Claim Under Policy No. 61625," Controller of Insurance Simla, 1978, Abhilekh Patel, National Archives of India, accessed online on dated 15th August 2025.

challenges and encouraging innovation in archival practices. The establishment of sustained, low-cost fellowship programmes would significantly strengthen professional standards and contribute to the systematic development and long-term growth of archival infrastructure in India.

Unfortunately, even *The Indian Archives*, a bi-annual journal published by the National Archives since 1947, the oldest and only dedicated journal on Indian archival practices, was discontinued by 2010. This journal had provided a continuous platform for archivists and other scholars to discuss archival issues, yet instead of promoting and upgrading it, the government chose to shut it down. Over the past few decades, these developments have led to a noticeable decline in its functioning and vitality. Since 2015, the National Archives has been organising exhibitions on certain occasions. I have visited these exhibitions, where archival materials are displayed using advanced technology and large screens. These exhibitions are visually attractive and free for the public. While I do not oppose such exhibitions, they lack a permanent structure and do not present groundbreaking or rare information. The Archives simply showcase existing records without much creativity or curatorial skill, and a significant amount of money is spent on these displays. Considering that the National Museum is located just a few metres away, one must ask whether a separate archival museum is truly necessary. The primary responsibility of the National Archives is to maintain and preserve records. Yet, contemporary records are often missing from the repository, Abhilekh Patal is mismanaged, and the thirty-year rule is inconsistently implemented; researchers still face difficulties accessing files even 40–60 years after their creation. The Archives are failing in their core mission. Resources and energy should be redirected toward proper record-keeping and strict implementation of the thirty-year rule, rather than focusing on exhibitions and a museum.

Filling the Gaps: Contributions of Private Archives

In the context of contemporary history writing, one important issue that has come to light is the weakness and scattered nature of India's contemporary archival database. For research on recent themes, even institutions such as the PMML (earlier known as Nehru Memorial Museum and Library), popularly known as the Teen Murti Library, have not systematically collected dispersed

records on many aspects of the contemporary era. Moreover, individuals and institutions, both large and small, who wish to donate their lifelong collections to PMML are often discouraged from doing so. This has also been one of the reasons behind the growth of private archives in recent decades.

In this context, the ACI, supported by funding from HDFC Bank, have rapidly emerged in recent years. The number of business and corporate, academic, family, religious, cultural, and digital/online archives has also grown significantly, preserving the records of many important personalities and institutions. These collections could otherwise have been part of government or semi-government archives and libraries.

Another major reason for the rise of private archives is that government archives are not adapting themselves to the new research-oriented methodologies that are being introduced, and have failed to adapt to changing times. Their operations are extremely slow, delays are common, and it is rare to receive a positive or supportive response from the staff. Slow processes and an anti-research environment in many of these archives have created fertile ground for private and autonomous archives. The situation in state archives is even worse. For instance, I recently visited the Karnataka State Archives, known as the Historical Records Section. Before going, I searched online to find mandatory documents and guidelines, but could not locate any relevant information. Based on my previous experience with other archives, I carried my institutional letter and voter ID card. However, the staff demanded additional documents such as copies of Aadhaar, PAN, passport, and two passport-size photographs. They also refused to accept my institutional letter, which was printed on the official letterhead and signed by the Registrar in the "To Whom It May Concern" format. Instead, they insisted that the letter must be addressed directly to the Director of the Archives. Furthermore, they informed me that even after submitting all the required documents, the permission process would take about a week, and only then would I be allowed to access the records. Until then, I was not permitted to consult even the catalogue. The larger point here is that the environment in state archives is not at all conducive for researchers.

In a way, the unavailability of various documents related to contemporary history writing in the National and State Archives has also contributed to the

expansion of private and autonomous archives. The expansion itself is not a problem; in fact, the problem is that private archives charge a significant amount of money in the name of compulsory membership to read the records or to obtain a copy of any document. As a result, students from economically weaker backgrounds are deprived and face difficulty in doing research. In this context, a few days ago, the documents of Agyeya Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan were donated to Ashoka University by the Vatsalya Nidhi Trust. This raised concerns among many historians because Agyeya was a revolutionary figure, a pioneering poet, novelist, critic, editor, and translator in modern Hindi literature. He is regarded as one of the most influential literary figures of the 20th century, known for introducing new sensibilities and experimental trends in Hindi writing.³²

In this context, Dr Subhinith Kaushik, a historian, expressed his displeasure in an article published in *The Wire*. The article, titled “शोधार्थी से ऊंची रकम वसूलता अभिलेखागार: अशोका यूनिवर्सिटी पर चंद सवाल”³³ (“Archives Charging High Fees from Researchers: A Few Questions on Ashoka University”), was later removed from the *The Wire* website. In his article, he argued that researchers from the weaker and marginalised backgrounds, as well as general public and common students, would have to pay a significant amount to study the documents of Agyeya. He further noted that if Agyeya’s documents had been deposited in the PMML, they would have been accessible to all researchers at a much lower cost. However, I was partially convinced by Dr Kaushik’s argument, because the PMML is an autonomous institute and also charges compulsory membership fees that are almost equal to those of the ACI. However, the reprographics³⁴ charges differ significantly (see Table 2).

Apart from this, the ACI also houses the documents of many other legendary figures and individuals who opposed privatisation in their public lives. So here the question is, why did they hand their archival documents to a private

³² Akshaya Mukul, *Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover: Many lives of Agyeya* (Gurugram: Vintage Books, Penguin Random House India, 2022).

³³ डॉ शुभनीत कौशिक, “शोधार्थी से ऊंची रकम वसूलता अभिलेखागार: अशोका यूनिवर्सिटी पर चंद सवाल,” समता मार्ग, September 30, 2024, <https://samtamarg.in/2024/09/30/archives-charging-high-amount-from-researchers-some-questions-on-ashoka-university>.

³⁴ Reprography refers to the process of making copies of archival documents by using technologies like photocopying, scanning and microfilming.

university? Upon further investigation, I found that officials of the Vatsalya Nidhi Trust had repeatedly requested PMML to accept Agyeya's important documents, but no positive response was received. Then they approached the ACI, which promptly agreed to acquire Agyeya's collection. After this, I filed an RTI application to obtain information about the acquisition policy of PMML, specifically, the grounds on which they acquire collections, and also requested data from the last five years. However, even after submitting three RTIs and their follow-up. I did not receive a valid or satisfactory response.³⁵

A significant point here is that the ideological and political differences in government and semi-government archives and libraries have directly contributed to the rise of private archives and libraries. A recent example is the papers related to the Samajwadi Party, which was established by the late Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and have been donated to the ACI.³⁶ Had these documents been placed in the Uttar Pradesh State Archives, any researcher could have accessed them without paying fees. The larger question remains: why was the private collection, directly related to the former Chief Minister, not acquired by the Uttar Pradesh State Archives? This issue itself could become an important subject of research. However, the BJP government of Uttar Pradesh did not consider it ideologically appropriate to preserve the papers of Samajwadi Party in the State Archives. As a result, researchers will now have to bear the costs of consulting these materials.

To understand the fee structure of archives, I explored their websites in greater detail. For reference, I selected four institutions as a sample for my study: the NAI, which comes under the central government; the DDA, which functions

³⁵ In my first RTI, I asked about the acquisition policy of PMML—specifically, the basis on which records are accepted or rejected—and also requested a five-year list showing how many people had approached and on what grounds their records were accepted or rejected. In response, they referred to a court case and stated that I needed to explain my intention for asking such questions. I then filed another RTI, clarifying that I am an archivist conducting research on archives. Their reply was that my question was not relevant. Subsequently, I submitted a first appeal, stating that I was not satisfied with their response. After a month, they disposed of my RTI, saying that as a researcher I was required to submit a bona fide letter from my university. The intention was very clear; they did not want to provide the information.

³⁶ "Samajwadi Party Publications," Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka Archives, accessed November 26, 2025, https://archives.ashoka.edu.in/paper_details/211.

under the Delhi state government; the PMML, a semi-autonomous institution that holds numerous private papers, archival collections, rare books, and periodicals; and the ACI, a private archive that has expanded rapidly in recent years. The ACI have acquired a large number of records from various donors, many of whom were unable to deposit their collections with PMML due to petty politics and the ideological positions of the current government. Here, another question arises: when semi-government institutions like the PMML do not accept the papers of important historical figures such as Agyeya, how many others might have been denied the opportunity to deposit their collections? In this context, the growing inclination of individuals towards private archives becomes more understandable.

The table below shows that government archives like the NAI and the DDA do not charge for reading (online/offline) archival records or conducting research. In contrast, autonomous and semi-government institutions such as the PMML, as well as private archives like Ashoka University, impose reasonable fees for accessing records and higher charges for reprographics services. Many argue that these charges are not excessively high; however, it is important to recognise that research often spans several years, requiring frequent visits to multiple archives and libraries. According to the PMML annual report, they earn Rs. 12,04,549 from membership and Rs. 1,79,210 from copies of photographs provided to research scholars.³⁷ Consequently, compulsory memberships and access fees at multiple archives and library institutions can become a significant burden. This is especially challenging for scholars who are enrolled in the state universities and travel to Delhi to study archival materials, and it can be an expensive undertaking. Providing online access to the records of institutions like the ACI and the PMML would greatly ease this burden and be highly beneficial for researchers.

I generally do not support private or autonomous archives, as they often impose membership fees to access documents. However, a persistent challenge with government and semi-government archives is their reluctance to accept the records of many eminent personalities, politicians, and social workers. In this context, the initiative of the ACI to preserve such collections

³⁷ Prime Minister Museum and Library, *57th Annual Report 2022-2023* (New Delhi: Teen Murti House, 2023), 7.

comes as a significant relief, particularly for individuals and groups who are ideologically or politically at odds with the ruling government.

Table 2: Comparative Overview of Membership Fees and Other Charges³⁸

Institutions	Membership fee for Indian Scholars	Reprographics charges for Indian Scholars
National Archives of India	Free for all, digital records can be accessed without additional costs; payment required for downloads.	Downloading of digital Image: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 0-20 images- free of cost ● 20-50 images- ₹2 per image ● 50-100 images- ₹3 per image ● 100-above- ₹5 per image Physical Printout: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ₹2 per copy, and for ● Colour prints, ₹8 per copy Scholars can use cameras to click pictures of documents free of charge.
Department of Delhi Archives	Aadhar required for online registration; documents can be accessed digitally, free of cost.	Earlier, the charges were ₹3 per page for photocopies, and researchers could also take digital copies using their own camera by paying ₹3 per image. After the digitisation of records, the cost has increased significantly; ₹20 for downloading a single page.

³⁸ The details have been collected online from the official websites of the respective institutions: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "National Archives of India (NAI) Reduced the User Charges for Downloading Documents from Abhilekh Patal," accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2110199>; Archives of Contemporary India, "Scholar Guidelines," Ashoka University, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://archives.ashoka.edu.in/scholar-guideline>; Department of Delhi Archives, "Payments," Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://archives.delhi.gov.in/abhilekh/payments.jsp>; Prime Ministers Museum and Library, "Rules Governing Scholars' Access to Private Papers and Institutional Records Digitally" (Manuscripts Section, Teen Murti House, New Delhi), accessed 27 October 2025, <https://pmml.nic.in/downloadArchive/14>.

Prime Minister Museum and Library	<p>Catalogue is available online, but to access and read the records, membership is mandatory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Up to one week: ₹200 ● Up to one month ₹500 ● Up to one year: ₹1,000 	<p>The charges for xeroxing/scanning for Indian Scholars are ₹ 5 per page/ document; for foreign scholars, ₹10 per page/document.</p> <p>Photograph charges for one digital photo of 600 dpi is ₹200 per photo. Copyright charges for single photograph is ₹1,000.</p>
Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University	<p>Catalogue is available online, but to access the records, membership is required.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● One day ₹200 ● One month ₹400 ● Six months ₹1,000 ● One year ₹1,500 	<p>Duplication/scanning (A1–A4 pages): ₹10 per page (extra for pen drive as per GB).</p> <p>Photographs/Images:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 300 dpi: ₹200 per photo + pen drive charges ● 600 dpi: ₹400 per photo + pen drive charges

At the same time, it is important to note that beyond the national and state archives, a number of archival initiatives have emerged as a form of resistance to mainstream state-controlled archival practices. Some of these, such as The Queer Archive for Memory, Reflection and Activism (QAMRA), Peoples Archives of Rural India (PARI), distinguish themselves by not charging membership fees, thereby making historical and cultural materials more accessible to researchers and the public.

Access to private and autonomous archives often requires prior permission, and researchers must provide detailed explanations of why they wish to view specific records. Some institutions even request a bona fide certificate from the researcher's university and a reference letter from their supervisor. Independent scholars, in particular, face significant difficulties in obtaining membership at autonomous and private archives. For example, many individuals who have completed their M.A. and are preparing for a Ph.D. or

independent research have had their membership applications to PMML rejected. They are asked to provide an institutional letter, but after passing out of M.A., no university or department provides any kind of bona fide letter.³⁹ Access is entirely at the discretion of the archive authorities; ordinary or independent researchers cannot freely visit multiple archives. Moreover, sensitive or important documents in private and personal archives are often restricted for common individuals. Their rules and regulations can change according to institutional convenience, limiting transparency.

Despite facing criticism for limited accessibility, discretionary rules, and higher charges, private archives play a crucial role in filling gaps left by government repositories. Many government archives, while extensive, do not always hold records on regional, community-specific, or contemporary subjects. On the contrary, private and autonomous archives, such as those maintained by universities, research organisations, think tanks, NGOs, art-related agencies and personal collections, often preserve these materials that would otherwise be lost or overlooked, including letters, manuscripts, photographs, and other kinds of contemporary records. By collecting, organising, and sometimes digitising these resources, private archives provide researchers with access to unique and rare sources. In this way, they complement government archives, enriching the historical record and supporting scholarship that might not be possible through public institutions alone.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although research methodologies in India have evolved with new approaches and significant changes, formal archives have not experienced the necessary transformations. Traditional archives, both at the national and state levels, still face difficulties in carrying out their core responsibilities, including the effective implementation of the 30-year rule, and they have no vision for the preservation of extinct documents in

³⁹ Conversation with Vibhanshu Kalla, March 20, 2025. Vibhanshu has completed his M.A. in Development Studies from Russia, and wanted to access the PMML (Teen Murti Library) for his independent research. When he went to apply for membership, the authorities denied his request, stating that he could only access the library if he had already published some work or produced a bona fide certificate from an academic institution.

unorganised sectors. In this situation, it can also be said that the government is making continuous efforts to distance itself from contemporary and socially relevant research in the field of social sciences. It forces researchers to depend on alternative sources for studying contemporary issues. As a result, private archives have rapidly expanded in recent years, generating some profits in exchange for their services.

This also reflects a systematic effort to distance lower-income groups from research. This is not only happening in the archives, but all over the education sector in India as well,⁴⁰ where public university research institute's archives are changing continuously, autonomous institutes, private agencies, and think tanks are promoted by the government, charging substantial amounts of money for their services. But we should always remember that the purpose of any country's national archives, educational and research institutes was not established to make a profit. Rather, it is to contribute directly to the interests of the country and society from an administrative and research perspective, and to support policy-making. It promotes research on various aspects of society that help the government in planning and understanding the complexities of social, economic, political, and cultural issues, and in attempting to find solutions. In this way, research directly contributes to the social and economic development of the country.

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⁴⁰ John J. Kennedy, "Rising education costs turn aspirations into burdens," *The New Indian Express*, August 28, 2024, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2024/Aug/27/rising-education-costs-turn-aspirations-into-burdens>.

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