

Documenting Non-Visits to Archives

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This research article stems from methodological questions related to my doctoral study, based heavily on textual sources. It documents my non-visits to archives, or each instance wherein I make use of rare, primary documents that are either already housed or ought to be preserved in archival spaces, without actually visiting one. The idea is to understand what necessitated or facilitated these non-visits to conventional archival spaces, each of which leads one to the alternate places from where these texts have been accessed. The article highlights the human processes associated with arranging and accessing archival spaces, the silences therein, and also discusses the role of digital archives in facilitating my non-visits. It thus explores the ever-expanding notions of the archive and its departure from the conventional physical structure housing State records to newer imaginations of repositories of pasts preserved in texts.

Keywords: Archive, Sankaradeva, *Satra*, digital archive.

Introduction

This article is born out of my ongoing doctoral research experience. My work entails understanding the recollection of pre-modern South Asian Bhakti saint-poets in late 19th and early 20th century colonial India through the resurgence of interest around a figure called Sankaradeva in the Brahmaputra Valley. Sankaradeva fits into the mould of pre-modern Bhakti saints of South

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Asia, who propagated a simple method of venerating a single Godhead (Vishnu of the Hindu pantheon in Sankaradeva's case) through verses and prayers composed in vernacular languages, without indulging in complicated and expensive ritual practices. Sankaradeva was born sometime in the late 15th century and gained popularity in the 16th-century Brahmaputra Valley. My research engages with the context of the recollection of Sankaradeva in the 20th century, leading to the formation of a new organisation named Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha (which can be roughly translated as the Saint Sankaradeva Association). The work borrows from the conceptual frameworks of 'public memory' as forwarded by Novetzke among several others. According to Novetzke, the entanglement of 'history' and 'memory' creates the recollection of pre-modern saints in India. The 'history' element comes from scholars who undertake careful examination and analysis of data, whereas the 'memory' part of it is sourced from devotees who narrate stories with a strong emotional quotient passed on through generations.¹ This points towards the volatility of 'public memory' - the propensity of people's collective remembering of something being refashioned with the requirements of the time. My research tends to seek the socio-political questions that made Sankaradeva relevant in the 20th-century Brahmaputra Valley, and the anachronism involved in evaluating, imagining, and sustaining his personality.

In this article, the methodology I employ is more relevant than the topic of my research, as I intend to focus on the processes of locating archival texts and documents that serve as crucial primary sources in my study. I must, at the outset, provide a disclaimer that there is no innovation in this regard. I use the old techniques of studying texts and uncovering whatever is possible while questioning the silences. The only aspect that may be considered noteworthy to some degree is the considerable diversity of texts that I deal with. Pre-modern compositions attributed to Sankaradeva, dating back to the 16th century (including verses, plays, and translations and adaptations of Sanskrit texts), compositions of his disciples who subsequently headed the spiritual path paved by him, his reverential biographies, chronicles of the Ahom dynasty ruling over parts of pre-colonial Brahmaputra Valley, colonial accounts describing the region and its people, Census Reports, and articles in

¹ Christian Lee Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 70-72.

leading periodicals among others - all of these have been classified as primary sources. These have been delved into with the aim of unearthing references to Sankaradeva or his *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*.

The term *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* indicates the process of monotheistic initiation into the fold of Vishnu worship through the singing of *naam* or verses in praise of the God. In a way, I am looking for Sankaradeva in these texts-what of him has been written about, how, and in what context. For a study based almost entirely on textual sources, save the last chapter, which is designed to involve ethnographic work, it is interesting that I have hardly visited any form of physical archival spaces. My interest in writing this article emerged from a sense of guilt that accompanied these non-visits to archives as a student of history. However, this must never be equated with not accessing what are perceived to be archival documents, which I have consistently accessed and examined. Do these non-visits make my research less serious, or make it seem inadequate in terms of methodological effort? We may circle back to this concern later in the article, but at the outset, it is important that I qualify how I intend to use the term non-visit—to refer to each instance where I access an archival document without visiting a physical space such as the State Archive or the National Archive.

Terms such as archive and archival documents cannot be used in passing without qualifying the sense in which they have been employed. This necessitates a brief recapitulation of the different ways in which scholars have defined and broadened the idea of an archive over the years. The Greek word *arkheion* is the etymological ancestor of the word 'archive,' indicating a magistrate's or governor's residence. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the word was used to refer to a physical structure where a large range of documents, especially royal charters and deeds were stored. Gradually, an archive was distinguished from a library by associating it particularly with governments, whereas a library was perceived as significant for academic materials. Alexandra Walsham highlights the redundancy of such a categorisation, given that both libraries and archives often cross this assumed boundary. Archives may contain information in a government building but may include a varied repository of documents, not always pertinent to governance or the state. Robert Cotton's library, Walsham writes, which was publicly accessible,

contained state-associated materials.² Archive is a complex concept that eludes easy definition. Eventually, it marked a departure from the conventional idea of a government repository alone and included diversified materials, preserved for posterity. Peter Lester uses the term archive in two ways - first, 'documented and recorded information about the past,' and second, 'a building or repository where these records are kept.'³

As much as by what is included, archives are also defined by what is missing in them. Not every document that reaches the archivist makes its way into the archive. Many are not deemed essential enough to be preserved, especially given the physical limitations of space in archive buildings. Several documents are sifted out, particularly because of their content not being aligned with the sensibilities of those in power who control the archives. Most importantly, there are numerous facets of the past that were never documented in the first place. Moss and Thomas quote Trouillot, who attributed the creation of silences in the archives to four crucial junctions - 'the moment of fact creation,' essentially the time when the source documents and records are being written, 'the moment of fact assembly,' whereby the records are sorted and arranged in the archives, the moment of fact retrieval,' wherein researchers access these records, and finally, the 'moment of retrospective significance,' wherein these are interpreted and written as history.⁴

Archives have moved beyond the static idea of housing documents, and are increasingly viewed as dynamic and subjective spaces, intermediated by archivists. The primary functions of archives —'acquisition, arrangement, processing, and description,' which were once viewed as 'impartial storing activities' are now seen as people-handled processes that are products of the

² Alexandra Walsham, "The Social History of the Archive: Record Keeping in Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present* 230, no. 11 (November, 2016), 14-15, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtw033>.

³ The terms record, documents, and archive are not synonymous, with small degrees of difference. Nevertheless, Lester qualifies that he uses them "interchangeably." See Peter Lester, *Exhibiting the Archive: Space Encounter and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 22-24.

⁴ Michael Moss and David Thomas ed., *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and Uncreated Archives* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2-3.

socio-political contexts in which they are located.⁵ The once perceived passive role of the archivist as a guardian of these spaces, and ‘handmaiden of the historian,’ has also undergone significant changes.⁶ There is an increasing acknowledgement of the archivist’s role as an active agent in creating these archives, sorting the historical materials, and deciding what makes its way into the archive in the first place. The archivist is seen as a ‘facilitator,’ and even an ‘activist’ with a focus on social justice. They negotiate with the power structures that determine ‘record-keeping systems.’⁷

In my study, each non-visit stemmed from situational requirements, which I have outlined in the three sections of the paper before the concluding paragraphs. The first part deals with locating rare manuscripts pertaining to Sankaradeva’s Vaishnavism, comprising the first set of primary sources for my study. These are not preserved in the State archives but in spiritual centres of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* called *Satras*. Thus, a non-visit in this context does not signify not visiting the spaces where the primary texts are located; instead, it implies the non-requirement of visiting conventional archives due to the religious nature of the sources, which in turn determines their location. In the second section, I discuss how I accessed the next set of primary sources relevant to my research, comprising accounts and documents pertaining to the Brahmaputra Valley, produced by colonial officials. This section provides a glimpse of the journey of a few such texts that have travelled through time and across continents before being made available to the public today via digital media. Thus, digital accessibility of these texts facilitated non-visits to the physical, conventional archives during my study.

The third section talks about what is unavailable across conventional and non-conventional archives that I engage with, thus creating a need to look beyond and locate materials in alternative spaces. These are predominantly the voices of people of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early 20th century, and their assessment of the contemporary situation they were placed in, constituting the third type of primary sources for my research. Assamese periodicals published from the 19th century onwards hosted intense debates on various social

⁵ Iva Lučić, “Making Sense of the Archive,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 4, (January 2023), 573-574, <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2022-0069>.

⁶ Walsham, “The Social History of the Archive,” 1-2.

⁷ Lester, *Exhibiting the Archive*, 28-30.

matters. However, the issues of these old periodicals were not preserved in any designated space. It was the individual and group efforts to compile, edit, and publish volumes of such unpreserved sources that proved instrumental in ensuring that these were not lost in time. Moreover, there are voices that had never been documented in the first place, thereby completely obliterating the process of preserving them in archives. The third section also particularly highlights the absence of female voices in the sources that I engage with. In such scenarios, one is required to move beyond textual sources and begin looking for information and insights into the lived experiences of the people. Thus, with such backgrounds, non-visits are not a matter of choice that I make; rather, they become a necessity, for accessing sources that are not to be found in the archives.

To answer the question raised earlier, non-visits, therefore, are not a methodological lapse in my research, nor do they indicate a lack of seriousness. These are situational requirements that allowed me to access a range of different kinds of primary sources for my study and thus, fill the gaps in the conventional archives. Moreover, what I define as non-visits is not limited to this particular research and may be applicable across studies, in any such situation wherein sources are preserved in alternate spaces, or may have moved beyond the realm of physical spaces into the digital sphere, or were not preserved at all. I, nevertheless, do not intend to diminish the significance of archives. On the contrary, through the description of the events of non-visits, I wish to highlight the ways in which the idea of archives has transcended the conventional spaces that it had been associated with for long.

In the first section, the idea of archives shifts from conventional, state-sponsored, physical infrastructures, to local initiatives of spiritual centres of the *Satras*, wherein rare manuscripts were preserved in specifically designated places. The second section discusses the aspect of digital archives, their associated convenience, and concerns. The third finally talks about looking for hitherto unpreserved sources, and thereby creating one's own repository of materials and lived experiences. This article does not intend to be a work of social or cultural history. Rather, it highlights the methodological possibilities of dealing with archival documents and the spaces where these may be located, other than the physical confines of conventional archives.

Availing Non-Visits to *Satra* Archives

Coming back to my research, which deals with a range of pre-colonial texts, my first concern was to understand the nature of these sources and thereafter identify the possible places to locate them. As a student of history, my first instinct was to look towards the archive. The Assam State Archive in Guwahati has a colonial legacy that can be traced to the Records Branch that was created in 1874 in the Chief Commissionership of Assam. In 1980, the State Archives Organisation was set up and attached to the General Administration Department, and in 1996 it officially became a Directorate. Today, it is under the Secretariat Administration Department and contains a host of materials from the 1770s onwards, primarily official correspondences, Census Reports, Acts, Assembly debates, and the like.⁸ The pre-colonial, unsurprisingly, is largely absent in a space that was created out of a necessity to maintain colonial records.

My first set of primary sources consists of pre-colonial texts attributed to, and composed on, Sankaradeva and his *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. These include, among others, compilations of verses, translations and adaptations of the *Bhagawata Purana*, one-act plays or *Ankiya Naats*, songs, and the like authored by Sankaradeva and his disciples. Naturally, the State Archives did not host such pre-modern texts that had no tangible association with colonial governance. Thus, a search in the State Archive did not yield many results. Some of these, however, have survived as manuscripts, written predominantly on the barks of *Sanchi* or *Agar* trees, preserved in the *Satras*, institutions where the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* is performed. *Sanchi* bark was durable and suitable for writing. Folios of these were prepared for Sankaradeva and the later *gurus* of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* to render a written form to their compositions. Many were also illustrated, portraying scenes from ancient Sanskrit texts that helped propagate *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* among the people. Created and preserved by *Satras*, the process became popular and came to be known as the *Satriya* style of manuscript-making.⁹ Copies of older manuscripts were produced in a

⁸ "Our History," *Assam Archives*, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://archives.assam.gov.in/>.

⁹ Irfan Laskar and Shahida Ansari, "Illustrated Manuscripts at Auniati Satra of Majuli Island, Assam," *Heritage Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 9 (2021-2022), 1138-

similar fashion at the onset of damage. The only Sanskrit text attributed to Sankaradeva, *Bhakti Ratnakara*, was originally in the custody of a *Satra* at a place called Barpeta. This was later copied and preserved in the Kamalabari *Satra* located in the river island of Majuli.¹⁰ Thus, in the *Satra* storehouses—some maintained and some dilapidated—*Sanchi Puthis* or booklets, remain. Many of these were retrieved and published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS). This department, too, had its roots in colonial Assam, being established in 1928 with the primary aim of the collection of rare manuscripts.¹¹ In 1940, Birinchi Kumar Barua, a Professor of Assamese at Gauhati University and the Deputy Director of DHAS, published a compilation of sixteen plays, attributed to Sankaradeva and his later *gurus*, Madhavadeva and Gopaladeva. In the preface to the first edition, B. K. Barua expressed his gratitude to the *Satradhikars*, or heads of three of the most prominent *Satras* of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam—Auniati, Dakshinpaat and Kamalabari—for granting him access to some of the manuscripts.¹²

The *Satras*, which are spaces for the practice and propagation of *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* headed by *Satradhikaras*, consist primarily of a large prayer hall, or *Naamghar*, where devotees gather and sing verses in the name of God. At one end of the *Naamghar* is the *Manikut*, or sanctum-sanctorum, where usually a holy text is placed, and outside this space are the residential units of monks.¹³ The *Satras* are therefore sites of public performance of devotion, and yet, they may also be perceived as significant archives containing pre-colonial manuscripts. *Satras*, as archives, can be seen engaging in decisions regarding the selection of texts and the formats of preservation. Far from the idea of archives as passive entities, *Satras* represent spaces that have been specifically preserving documents which help enhance a certain form of veneration. Simultaneously, *Satras* are also considered custodians of a process and style of

1139. <https://www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/CurrentIssue.aspx?VID=9>, accessed December 1, 2025.

¹⁰ Surjya Hazarika ed., *Srimanta Sankaradeva Bakyamrit* (Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2014), 0.40-0.49.

¹¹ "History," *Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies*, accessed December 4, 2024, <https://dhas.assam.gov.in/>.

¹² Birinchi Kumar Barua ed., *Ankiya Naat: Or a Compilation of Sixteen Dramas Written by Mahapurush Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Gopaladeva* (Guwahati: Government of Assam, 1954), v.

¹³ Satyendra Nath Sarma, *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, (Guwahati: Guwahati University Press, 2016), 100-101.

writing that has now slipped into oblivion. Among the texts preserved in the *Satras* are the *Satria Buranjis*, which are chronological records that include stories of the origins of the *Satras*, a list of *Satradhikaras*, and other relevant details. These were regularly revised and updated. Additionally, more prominent *gurus* had separate biographical accounts written by disciples, known as *Charita Puthis*.¹⁴

On the riverine island of Majuli, home to some of the most well-known *Satras* in Assam, various *Satras* have manuscripts written on barks of *Sanchi* trees. *Uttar Kamalabari Satra*, *Elengi Narasingha Satra*, *Auniati Satra*, *Samaguri Satra* and *Bhogpur Satra* are only a few names to take. Most of these *Satras* keep the regularly used manuscripts in the prayer hall, or *Naamghar*, where the *bhakats* initiated into *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* read them during prayers. These individuals, specifically known as *pathaks* or readers, know how to read these texts, usually written in archaic Assamese or *Brajawali* languages. Other manuscripts which are not used daily are preserved in the storehouses. *Satras* that are maintained by certain families through the years, such as the *Samaguri Satra*, keep these manuscripts in personal possession and pass these on across generations. Usually, the head of the *Satra*, or someone whom he entrusts the responsibility, oversees the preservation of these manuscripts and decides who may be granted access.

On one of my visits to the island, where I got a chance to meet and interact with some of the *bhakats* and *Satradhikars*, I tried to understand more about the manuscripts preserved therein. When asked whether women could view and read these texts, most *Satras*, except a few like the *Auniati Satra* who outrightly refused, responded by saying that no one has ever made such a request, and thus no one has been granted access. Nevertheless, there is no given rule that they cannot read. Men from different castes can and have been given access to these manuscripts in most of the *Satras*, however, they need to take the required prior permissions, wear traditional clothes, and approach with a devotional mind to read. Thus, while access to these texts is possible, there are specific procedures in different *Satras* that need to be navigated first. For

¹⁴ Hemachandra Goswami, *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta on Behalf of the Government of Assam, 1930), xxi-xxii. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.68268/mode/2up?view=theater>, accessed December 11, 2024.

women, the process may be more onerous, as many of the *Satras* in Majuli claim that no one has attempted it before.

In 1930, DHAS published a *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, including those collected from *Satras*. The catalogue detailed the content of the manuscripts and the places where they can be found, among other information. Numerous *Sanchipaata puthis* found in different *Satras* were catalogued here. Interestingly, texts attributed to Sankaradeva, copied on folios much after his demise were also in the possession of individuals who eventually presented those to the compilers of the catalogue. For instance, a *Sanchipaata Puthi* containing Sankaradeva's composition *Anadipatan* (which consists of verses of the *Bhagawata* rendered into Assamese), copied in 1686, was with a certain Baputiran Sarma Saykia, who deposited the text in the library of the Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti.¹⁵

With details of the physical appearance of the manuscripts, the approximate idea of the time of composition of the content, and that of copying by the scribe, the *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, was a remarkable step in facilitating research, particularly on pre-colonial manuscripts. One does not need to move from one *Satra* to the other *in order* to get an idea of the types of manuscripts these spaces have been custodians of. Furthermore, the availability of this catalogue online signals convenience, and it is also free to browse. It ensures the presence and accessibility of information on the manuscripts in one dedicated space, without needing to visit the *Satra* archives unless a physical inspection of these manuscripts is essentially mandated by a

¹⁵ Ibid., 1-10. The Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti or Assam Research Society was another colonial era organisation that was established in 1912 with the efforts of people like Sir Archdale Earle, Maharaja of Koch Behar - Narayan Bhupa Bahadur, Sir Edward Gait and others. The self-declared primary objective of the Society was to 'carry on researches in matters relating to history, archaeology, ethnography etc., all that usually comes under the purview of a Research Society, and to collect books, manuscripts, coins, copper-plates, statues, carved stones- etc., i. e. the things that should find place in a library and museum of such society.' This Society had preserved a few original and also transcribed manuscripts where the original could not be acquired, which included texts pertaining to the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*. Thus, while publishing the descriptive catalogue in 1930, these manuscripts were consulted and referred to. See S.K. Bhuyan, *Reports and Conspectus of the Kamarupa Anushandhan Samiti or The Assam Research Society* (Guwahati: KAS Publication, 1927), 1-10.

<https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.30157/page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed December 12, 2024.

particular study. Moreover, the digitisation of this catalogue allows researchers to access its contents in its entirety without having to visit even the DHAS in person. Thus, there are multiple layers of archiving at play here for the same manuscripts that facilitate a researcher like me, who primarily requires information on the types of texts available and their structure, and not necessarily their content, to avail a non-visit to a physical archival space. Moreover, publications of DHAS like B. K. Barua's compilation of sixteen one-act plays or *Ankiya Naats* attributed to Sankaradeva and later *gurus*, which too have also been digitised, handle the question of access to the content of some of these manuscripts. This compilation, in particular, serves as a primary source for my research, as it contains the scripts of these pre-colonial plays as found in the manuscripts, neither abridged nor paraphrased.¹⁶

Texts Travel

My next set of primary sources comprises documents written by colonial officials about the Brahmaputra Valley. Jean Baptiste-Chevalier was one of the first colonial (French) officials who travelled into and wrote about the region. His memoirs and journals, written in the 18th century, had to wait till 2008 to be printed, when the manuscripts were finally compiled and published. Chevalier, a Frenchman, travelled through the Brahmaputra Valley in the second half of the 18th century, during which he meticulously maintained journals. He eventually wrote a memoir of his experiences, gathering materials from different journal entries. These were donated to the Bibliotheque de l'Institut in Paris in 1926, along with other documents of the Chevalier family.¹⁷ In the early 2000s, a French researcher Jean Delouche, who knew about these manuscripts, passed the information to Caroline Dutta-Baruah, a researcher from Normandy. Caroline happened to be married to Bhaskar Dutta-Baruah, son of the famous Dutta-Baruah family that contributed immensely to the intellectual sphere of the Brahmaputra Valley through its writing and publishing ventures after the arrival of print technology in colonial Assam in

¹⁶ Barua, *Ankiya Naat*.

¹⁷ Jean Baptiste Chevalier, *The Adventures of Jean Baptiste Chevalier In Eastern India (1752-1765); Historical Memoir and Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet*, Translated by Delouche and Dutta-Baruah (Guwahati: LBS Publication, 2020), 1-4,

<https://archive.org/details/the-adventures-of-jean-baptiste-chevalier-in-eastern-india-1752-1765/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater>, accessed on December 9, 2024.

the early 20th century. This family owns the landmark Lawyers Book Stall, established in the 1940s, and has published some of the most prominent books on Assam. This association with the region likely ignited Caroline's interest in the manuscripts.

Delouche and Caroline carefully studied, compiled and translated the manuscripts from old French to English. The manuscripts were compared, and tallied with each other to meaningfully restore the content in places where they had been damaged.¹⁸ Finally, these were printed in 2008, thus, bringing in a lost voice from the past among the colonial accounts of Assam. However, since it is protected by copyright rules, the complete text of this book has not made its way to the digital archives for free access. The manuscripts of Chevalier were recovered from an archival space in Paris, compiled, rearranged, and printed, giving those centuries-old documents a new lease of life. The printed version of this is now available and must have already made its way into libraries, allowing easy access to researchers. It is also available online, even though partially, but still gives a fair idea of what the complete text is like.

John Peter Wade, an English physician, who travelled to the Brahmaputra Valley in the late 18th century, before the area was included in the British dominion, found two texts chronicling the past of the region—one in the language of the Ahoms and one in a form of pre-modern Assamese. He translated the latter and presented it to a certain Col. Kirkpatrick. The text, over time, found itself in the India Office Library. It was never printed, and thus only a single copy of the manuscript was preserved there. In the early 1920s, Benudhar Sharma found a clue to this text, after coming across a reference to J. P. Wade and his writing on the Brahmaputra Valley in another book. Sharma wrote to the India Office Library in London, hoping that he would find this particular book of Wade's there. The India Office in return informed him that they did, in fact, possess a manuscript by J. P. Wade named *History of Assam*, which they would allow him to borrow after acquiring the required permissions. To Sharma's surprise, the copy he received was actually a

¹⁸ Special Correspondent, "The Norman Connection: Assam's French Daughter-in-law Restores 18th Century Tome," *The Telegraph Online*, March 11, 2008, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/the-norman-connection-assam-s-french-daughter-in-law-restores-18th-century-tome/cid/607472>, accessed on December 9, 2024.

translation of a local chronicle by Wade, and not a history written by him. In the late 1920s, Sharma edited and ensured that the book appeared in print. Today, the entire text is available online for free browsing.

Such texts are remarkably old and thus have moved out of the copyright restrictions into the 'public domain' according to Indian copyright rules. The journey of this text and the layers of mediation that it has accumulated over the centuries would probably merit a separate article. It was a vernacular text discovered by Wade, who translated it into English, creating the first layer at which it was mediated. Since we do not have much information on or access to the chronicle that he translated, there is a lack of clarity regarding the thematic and linguistic proximity of the translation to the original. Benudhar Sharma talks about names being misspelt and altered in the translation, and also writes that while sticking to the original pattern of writing, he has provided additional notes and redistributed Wade's text into new chapters in the printed version. This is the second level of mediation, which is the version that finally reaches us. It cannot be ascertained whether the changes made by Sharma brought the text closer to or took it farther from the original chronicle, but it most definitely marks a journey of the text.

The chronicle, not in its original physical form but in essence, also made a spatial journey from the Brahmaputra Valley to London and back. The new edited and printed version of the text in the 1920s must have been sold in markets and made its way into libraries. The copy referred to here was accessed from the Birchandra State Central Library of Tripura and digitised in 2015 by the Digital Library of India. I accessed this from 'archive.org' which hosts a large number of free digital sources. To reach the readers, the content of this text has made a long expedition, in slowly changing forms and has moved in and out of physical archival spaces, be it the India Office Library in London or the Birchandra Library in Tripura, until it found its space in the intangible sphere of the digital archives.¹⁹

¹⁹ John Peter Wade, *An Account of Assam*, edited by Benudhar Sharma (North Lakhimpur: R. Sharma, Madhupur Tea Estate, 1927), vii-xv. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.125418/page/n15/mode/2up?view=theater>, accessed on December 15, 2024.

The other colonial sources, including the Census reports, are all easily accessible online, which completely obliterates the need to visit the physical archives. Digital archives enhance accessibility to texts substantially. A few fellow research scholars and others who were involved with research in the recent past have highlighted in my discussions with them the immense advantages of digital repositories. The emphasis was primarily on the aspect of financial benefits of the digital medium in terms of curtailing travel costs, especially when texts are located in areas that are far from where the researchers are based. Especially in situations such as that created by the pandemic, where travel becomes difficult, digital sources are of utmost significance. Further, tools like keyword search allow ease of the process of hunting for sources and prove instrumental in saving the researchers' time.²⁰ However, this article is far from being a eulogy for digitisation.

Digital archives also carry the same set of concerns as conventional physical archives, including the maintenance of infrastructure for preserving the archival documents. While they may not be physically present, the process of creating digital archives is not simply uploading digitised analogue records on a social media platform or website, Carbajal and Caswell write. There are concerns about maintaining these records across spatial and temporal limits, creating a strong base of metadata to ensure accessibility and the purpose with which these records are primarily created. These activities, in the first place, require physical 'infrastructure and labour.'²¹ Thus, the creation, maintenance and sustenance of digital archives do not constitute a digital activity in itself and require buildings and people to make it possible. Besides, the digitisation of analogue records is also a matter of discretion of the people involved, similar to the role of the archivist, who actively influences the materials that are found in the archive.²² Hence, any archive, by virtue of it being digital, does not automatically ensure a more democratic or access-friendly form of recordkeeping, as it too involves a process of selection and marginalisation of records, as in the case of physical archives.

²⁰ Telephonic Conversations and communication via Google Forms with Shubhojeet Dey, Shalom Gauri, Kartika Menon, Sonal Sharma and Barsha Misra in September 2024.

²¹ Itza A. Carbajal and Michelle Caswell, "Critical Digital Archives: A Review from Archival Studies," *American Journal of Ophthalmology* 126, no.3 (2021), 1105.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhab359>, accessed on December 22, 2024.

²² Ibid., 1101-1104.

The Question of Absences

My research benefits significantly from the writings and speeches that have been compiled and published as books. These compilations also come with prefaces and introductions which, more often than not, give the background of the composition, thus helping to situate it in contexts of their creation. For instance, one of these compilations that I use is the collection of an Assamese periodical named *Jonaki* published from the late 19th to the early years of the 20th century, by Assam Sahitya Sabha, and edited by Nagen Saikia, in 2001. It outlines the history of print in Assam and the context in which *Jonaki* began to be published—first from Calcutta in Bengal and later from Guwahati in Assam. Additionally, it provides crucial information on the funding of the periodical with details of advertisements that appeared in them, along with a partial list of customers and receipts of payment done by them.²³ Such works perform the dual function of primary and secondary sources in my study. While the introductory write-up, usually authored by the editors, provides useful secondary information, the periodical issues published in these compilations are primary materials for my study, which focus on the deliberations on the rising linguistic and nationalist sentiments among the educated elite in the colonial Brahmaputra Valley.

The issues of *Jonaki* were not preserved in any particular archive or library, and this necessitated Saikia to take up the laborious task of collecting these issues from multiple sources, including the homes of individuals who once subscribed to the periodical. Saikia began this work in the 1980s, and by the end of the decade, he submitted this compiled volume to the Assam Sahitya Sabha. The publication, however, was delayed due to a lack of sufficient funds and other associated concerns. Many of these issues could not be resolved successfully, and the editor has added notes to highlight these absences.²⁴ While letters to colonial officials, memoranda, and other such governmental documents that highlight the question of emerging linguistic sentiments among the people of the Valley can be found in the archives and periodicals, which contained long debates and deliberations on questions of a slowly consolidating ‘Assamese’ language, identity and religious practices, are missing from there. Thus, compilations such as these are instrumental in filling

²³ Nagen Saikia, ed., *Jonaki* (Guwahati: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 2001), 0.001-0.070.

²⁴ Saikia, *Jonaki*, 0.001–0.070.

the void and creating a portable collection of archivable documents which never made their way into the archives at all.

Most importantly, what stands out is the masculinity of the sources mentioned above. I use the term masculinity here, not just to refer to the male authors, editors, compilers, and colonial officials, but also to the rarity of reference to women at all. Women in all of these texts are written, if at all, as numbers and subjects, without according agency or even personhood in its real sense. Jahnabi Gogoi Nath analyses the depiction of women in the hagiographical works on Sankaradeva and writes about the portrayal of the image of a typical, suppressed wife, who preferred to stay with her husband as a slave even when he banished her from his house. This was in reference to the wife of a certain disciple of Madhavadeva (the spiritual heir of Sankaradeva) and the treatment he meted out to his wife.²⁵ To me, it poses a serious concern: how were the women imagining themselves in the changing socio-political contours of the Brahmaputra Valley within the colonial atmosphere of the 20th century? What was their relation with language, religion, and Sankaradeva's *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*? Nath also points towards an alternate depiction of women in the same sources on the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma* which presented them as submissive wives. The 'women traders,' many of whom took to trading a range of different goods in the local markets after the death of their husbands, were often portrayed as clever and having agency.

Moreover, there were a few more examples wherein women were shown to have vocalised their opinions and ensured suitable actions in their favour. Explaining the differences in the depiction of women, Nath writes that in the initial phase of the movement, women of the perceived lower sections of society enjoyed greater mobility and agency as compared to those from the higher ranks. However, this distinction faded eventually, as Vaishnava norms became stringent for all with the passing of time.²⁶ Sarah Tyson titles her book as a fundamental question - *Where are the Women?* She emphasises that what is missing in the archives is not always a result of accidental loss, but rather "the consequence of enduring practices of interdiction." The absence of substantial

²⁵ Nath, "Women, Religion and Society in Assam," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 70 (2009), 329-37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147679>, accessed December 23, 2024.

²⁶ Ibid.

information on women in the archives is a result of underplaying women's agency in the making of history.²⁷

Voices of women were seldom recorded in the written form, and thus it is unsurprising that we do not find them in the archives. Employing critical feminist theory in the study of archives, Cifor and Wood have highlighted the need to reimagine the archive in light of questions around community and organisation, and to bring in aspects of 'self-representation.' From the 1980s, as social history gained currency within the field of historical research, there was an increased interest in the absence of materials on women and other marginalised groups in the archives. This brought forth the need to imagine and create alternate archives, which could adequately include the unrepresented voices in history.²⁸ Thus, the idea is not just to highlight the absences, but also to initiate a process whereby this can be undone, if necessary, outside conventional archival spaces. Antoinette Burton projects the transformation of the domestic space, a site of memory, into an archive of sources based on which women construct their histories.²⁹ Burton dismantles the barriers between the private and public in this process and reclaims these spaces for women in history. The imagining of such non-conventional spaces as archives allows researchers to tackle with the silences in narrativising the past, which is especially significant for groups hitherto excluded from the pages of history to assert their presence and authority.

For our study, where written sources accorded to women or even delegating recognisable spaces to them are hard to come across, one might need to turn to everyday practices to see how women carry their generations of wisdom forward. Here, a non-visit to the archives is not only a choice that I make, but a necessity to try and fill the void in the archives. In my interactions with women who regularly visit the *Naamghars*, at least in the Assamese month of *Bhado*, which is considered the birth month of Sankaradeva, almost all of them expressed that they have learnt the etiquette to be followed during prayers or

²⁷ Sarah Tyson, *Where are the Women? Why Expanding the Archive Makes Philosophy Better* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), Xxxii, 142.

²⁸ Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, "Critical Feminism in the Archives," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, no. 2 (2017), 4-8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27>, accessed on 24 December, 2024.

²⁹ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4-5.

any religious event from elder women in the family or others in the vicinity through keen observation. This is the most common mode of knowledge transmission in human history, and it continues to remain so. However, for people like us, who are not necessarily from families that practice the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, that opportunity for prolonged observation of how women navigate these spaces, and the memories that they carry with them is hard to come by. A study of the relevance of memory passed down through generations, which carries the wisdom of how to navigate the contours of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*, especially for non-males, perhaps needs to be undertaken. This would fill the gap left behind by the dearth of references to or texts attributed to women and other genders within the fold of the *Ek-sharan-naam-dharma*.

In Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to highlight how a study, based primarily on textual sources, has been conducted without visiting the archives in the conventional sense of the term. On the contrary, archival documents have been accessed from alternate sources, including the digital medium. I use the term archival documents here to refer to rare texts of the past that proved significant for my study; alternatively, texts that ought to be archived. Compilations of old manuscripts, their re-publication, and further digitisation have helped my study immensely, providing access to documents whose original copies are either inaccessible or difficult to access. In a way, this article is a documentation of my non-visits to the archives, each of which serves as a testament to the use of alternate places to locate the required texts.

The changing concept of archives, especially those that bring the documents out of the confines of a single physical building controlled by a system of permissions, has been instrumental in facilitating research. It dismantles the physicality of the archive while broadening it to include one's own collection of accessible hard and soft copies of documents. It marks a transition from public to personal, with materials that are not necessarily protected by lines of permissions for access. I prepared Excel sheets with links to websites that host these materials. This cataloguing, in itself, constitutes the preparation of another type of source for the study of digital archival spaces. These websites enable the retention of the archival material for a longer duration, not

downloadable yet accessible unlimited times. However, what is also required is to move beyond texts to locate voices that have not been documented. In the context of my study, I have highlighted the absence or dismal representation of women in the textual sources. This creates the need to look beyond the available textual materials, and locate how knowledge and information have been transmitted without formal documentation. A clue to this may possibly be found in the songs, prayers, verses, and rituals carried out by women, which were also inherited by their daughters, and have the potential to be deciphered through a more ethnographic turn in my research, which is in the pipeline at the moment.

Non-visits to archives, as I continue my doctoral research, have not been a conscious choice, least of all has this practice been a statement against the relevance of archives today. Rather, they have been a necessity of my study, wherein most of the sources had to be located outside of the conventional archival spaces. The archives remain as relevant today as ever, the testimony of it lies in the ever-expanding notion of the 'archive' tailored to cater to the requirements of the present. The focus has shifted to understanding how archives are created in the first place, and identifying the human processes involved in building these seemingly impersonal spaces. Humans working at different levels of the conventional archives shape these spaces through layers of processes—starting from deciding which documents to preserve, to how to arrange and catalogue the same, the process of digitisation, determining the degree of accessibility, key-wording, and a range of other tasks. This understanding allows us to see archives as subjective, dynamic, and evolving entities. This, on the other hand, allows the acknowledgement of silences and absences present within conventional archives, and necessitates a re-imagination of these spaces. Thus, the idea of archives has moved beyond the notion of state-funded organisations devoted to the preservation of official, government documents. This paper attempted to briefly trace the trajectory of that departure.

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