

Beyond Numbers: Children, Agency, and Archival Absence

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“Beyond Numbers” tries to navigate the question of children’s representation within the archives, particularly in terms of their agency being neglected or mediated by someone else. Although historical and archival records largely mention or record them in terms of numbers, anonymous data, and censuses, their individuality remains absent. Evoking the idea of omission and inclusion, and devoid of agency, the collage therefore acts as an intervention that calls people to address this void and create spaces for children to become individual agents.

Keywords: Archives, Children, Agency, Absence, Statistics, Omission, Inclusion

All of us at one point in our biological development went through the childhood phase. A phase marked by complex changes and developments, extensively explained and examined by psychologists and influential thinkers like Sigmund Freud. Let’s keep it reserved for them. The attempt here is something else. Something based on the very agency of human beings beyond just statistics in archives, not a cliché, but one that could be a source of deep pondering and questioning. Something not only rooted in current geopolitical happenings, but also a product of history, that seems to exist only in the subconscious reality and is probably neglected? By now I assume a train of thought has been activated in the reader’s mind. To me, the revelation happened during one of the class lectures on Partition by Dr. Pallavi Chakravarty¹ which was further reinforced after attending a lecture by Prof. Madhavan K. Palat on ‘Genocide: Barbarism in Civilisation in the Twentieth

¹ Partition in South Asia is a foundation elective paper taught at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi by Dr Pallavi Chakravarty to Master’s Students.

century'.² The idea that finally materialised took the form of a collage that I labelled “Beyond Numbers” (Figure 1).

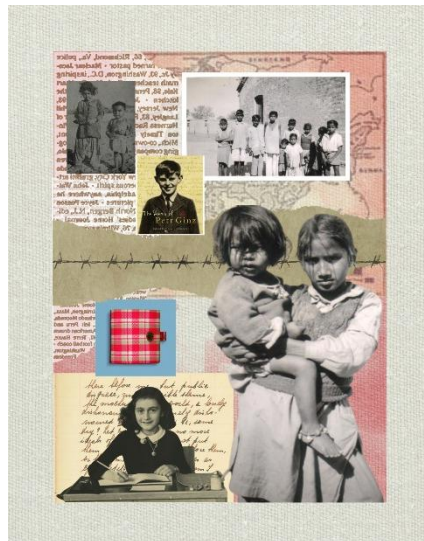


Figure 1: “Beyond Numbers”

The cover design thus tries to process and ponder over the question of children’s agency within archives and archival records. Their mere presence largely gets relegated to data and statistical information in the form of records and censuses as anonymous figures, as can be seen in the case of the Holocaust, Partition, and genocide studies.³ Their narratives, experiences, and personal records, even if they exist or once existed, either never find space in the archives at the right time or become relevant only when those who survived attain adulthood to narrate them. Moreover, their agency is governed by their parents not only when they are alive but also when they are dead, as can be sensed from the words of Otto Frank, Anne Frank’s father, who points out

² The lecture was attended in person. For further details, see, Prof. Madhavan K. Palat, “Genocide: Barbarism in the Twentieth Century,” *Reading & Archive*, accessed September 27, 2025, YouTube video, 1:51:11, https://youtu.be/9p-9W5SK0xI?si=nrtVBywDHOyrn_kb.

³ See, Joanna Beata Michlic, Yuliya von Saal, and Anna Ulric, Childhood during War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation, Introduction, *European Holocaust Studies* 5, (2024): 7-27 and Sukriti Lakhtakia, “Partitions, Literature, and Writing the Child in *Basti and The Shadow Lines*,” The Critical Childhoods and Youth Studies Collective (CCYSC), accessed December 24, 2025, <https://www.theccyssc.com/partition-essay4>. Scholarship in these fields reflects a trend that is shifting from looking at children as mere victims to historical contributors, while simultaneously critiquing how traditional archives have silenced them.

how her narrative available to the world today is because of his mediation.⁴ Therefore, they only become symbols in images, as representations of shock effects and traumatic experiences, and their agency often finds space in the alternative archives of literature.⁵

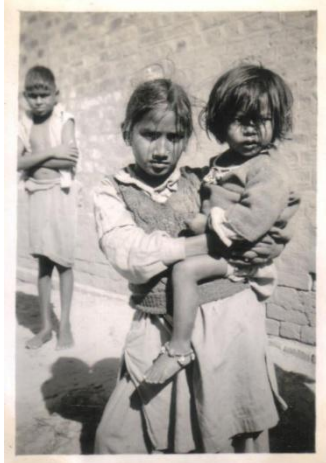


Figure 2: Indian children at Ambala, 1947⁶



Figure 3: Two child survivors of the Rawalpindi Massacre, 1947⁷

The collage, therefore, explicitly tries to bring into a single frame this anxiety between omission and inclusion, irrespective of children's agency. What automatically grabs attention is the image of a girl with a child (Figure 2) from Partitioned Punjab (Ambala), 1947, which functions as a stark imagery of children being the most endangered entities during periods of high vulnerability (Figure 3). These images from Ambala (Figures 2 and 4), available in public domain in broad historical collections (Old Indian Photos) and fragmented digital archives, capture children in evacuee settings (Figure 4), pointing to and showcasing their popular representation in the archival

⁴ Natasha Walter, "Only the Children Count," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/13/biography.classics>.

⁵ This idea is based on the conversation with Dr. Pallavi Chakravarty, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi. September 23rd, 2025.

⁶ "Indian Children in Ambala in 1947," photograph, 1947, *Wikimedia Commons*, public domain, accessed December 3, 2025, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_children_in_Ambala_in_1947_\(1\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_children_in_Ambala_in_1947_(1).JPG).

⁷ Prabodh Chandra, "Rawalpindi massacres survivors children", photograph, 1947, *Wikimedia Commons*, public domain (India), accessed December 4, 2025, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rawalpindi_massacres_survivors_children.jpg.

records as part of a larger catastrophe, but not as singular subjects with individual histories.

They were likely captured by anonymous photographers, probably tasked with documenting the sheer scale of the displacement rather than the specific humanity of the displaced. This lack of singularity is further emphasised by the haunting image of two children who survived the 1947 Rawalpindi massacres with severe burn injuries (Figure 3). This photograph, credited to Prabodh Chandra and part of the Dr. Kirpal Singh Collection, was originally published in the pamphlet *Rape of Rawalpindi*.⁸ It survives not as a family memento, but as evidentiary documentation of communal violence, an objective gaze that records trauma while omitting the names and their futures.



Figure 4: Indian children at Ambala, 1947⁹

These images are then contrasted with the images of Anne Frank (Figure 5) and Petr Ginz (Figure 7). Unlike the anonymous Partition children, these are some of the exceptional yet mediated examples of children from the Holocaust who could find space in the archival records. Anne Frank's school photo and the image of her checkered diary (Figure 6) originate from Anne Frank

⁸ Also available online via the Internet Archive. See, Prabodh Chandra, *Rape of Rawalpindi* (Lahore: Punjab Riot Sufferers' Relief Committee, 1947).

⁹ "Indian Children in Ambala in 1947," photograph, 1947, *Wikimedia Commons*, public domain, accessed December 3, 2025, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_children_in_Ambala_in_1947_\(2\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_children_in_Ambala_in_1947_(2).JPG).

Stichting Collection, preserved by her father, Otto Frank. Similarly, Petr Ginz's diary and drawings were discovered in a miraculous manner decades after his death at Auschwitz.¹⁰ While the Partition images represent a massified trauma, the Holocaust images to some extent signify a reclaimed identity, allowing them to exist as singular subjects. But on the whole, the children remain trapped in the omission of the archives, their names lost even as their faces continue to signify a nation's collective plain.



Figure 5: Anne Frank at school, 1940¹¹



Figure 6: Cover of Anne Frank's Diary, 1942¹²

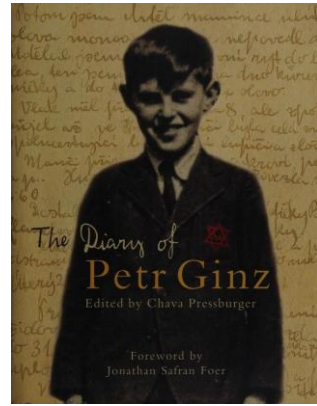


Figure 7: The Diary of Petr Ginz¹³

There's also an element of barbed wire in the design, pointing not only towards the catastrophe of children's lives during Partition and within camps, but also operating metaphorically as the restrictive nature of archives as a space for children. This collage is juxtaposed against the background of red hues with a translucent image of newspapers, maps, and Frank's writing in the background to add to the depth of the design. Overall, the collage is placed on a simple grey, textured background to evoke the feeling of a diary similar

¹⁰ Dita Asiedu, "The Diary of My Brother—a Child's Testimony that Life can go on, Even Amid the Horrors of the Holocaust," *Radio Prague International*, accessed December 24, 2025, <https://english.radio.cz/diary-my-brother-a-childs-testimony-life-can-go-even-amid-horrors-holocaust-8095144>.

¹¹ "Anne Frank at school," photograph, 1940, *Wikimedia Commons*, public domain, accessed September 29, 2025, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AnneFrank_SchoolPhoto.jpg.

¹² "Cover of the diary of Anne Frank", photograph, 1942, *Wikimedia Commons*, public domain, accessed September 27, 2025, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cover_of_the_diary_of_Anne_Frank_2.jpg.

¹³ Petr Ginz, "Cover page", in *The Diary of Petr Ginz, 1941–1942*, ed. Chava Pressburger, trans. Elena Lappin (London: Atlantic, 2007).

to the one that we use for journaling. Thus, "Beyond Numbers" tries to be an intercession in the form of a design to call attention from the viewers, readers, and archivists to come together and create space for children, to not treat them merely as numbers or statistics, but rather as individual narrators, geniuses, and even intellectuals.¹⁴ It also recognises the prospective nuances that *Reading the Archive* encompasses to address this lacuna in history, the humanities and the social sciences beyond psychology as a medium of change and a source of knowledge production.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Anna Sparrman, Victoria Hoyle, and Johanna Sjöberg, "Children as Archive Producers, Participants, and Agents: Introduction to the Special Issue on Children and Archives," *Archives and Records* 45, no. 3 (2024): 207–18.

¹⁵ At this juncture one must also address and recognise various initiatives that are already taken or underway to recognise this lacuna. A few examples could be quoted of Anne Frank House, American Antiquarian Society, The Museum of Childhood in Ireland, and so on.

Sparrman, Anna, Victoria Hoyle, and Johanna Sjöberg. "Children as Archive Producers, Participants, and Agents: Introduction to the Special Issue on Children and Archives." *Archives and Records* 45, no. 3 (2024): 207–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2024.2415693>.

Walter, Natasha. "Only the Children Count." *The Guardian*. July 13, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/13/biography.classics>.