

# Archiving Gallantry and Curating Memory: The Gallantry Awards Portal as a State-led Digital Archive

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*In 2017, the Government of India launched an ambitious archival initiative to develop a digital military archive, to democratise military history by making it more accessible to the public. Drawing on policy directives, interface studies, and selected awardee profiles, this study probes how the Gallantry Awards Portal mediates between memory and documentation. This paper aims to understand and answer the following questions: how does a public portal reshape our interaction with military archives? And how do narrative structures, design elements, and metadata conventions shape historical meaning? Situating the portal within broader discourses pertaining to war commemoration, public history, and digital archival praxis, this article interprets the archive as an artefact by highlighting the significance of its silences and omissions. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the ongoing conversations about archival memory, sponsored by the state, along with its administrative apparatus that limits the stories being told.*

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**Keywords:** Digital archives, Indian military history, Gallantry Awards Portal, State-sponsored archives, Archival silences

## Introduction

In the past decade, the convergence of public history, digital humanities, and archival practice has led to a significant transformation in the ways through which we access, interpret, and commemorate national histories.<sup>1</sup> Within this continuously changing domain, the Gallantry Awards Portal project,<sup>2</sup> initiated by the Government of India, represents a significant effort to render post-independence Indian military history more accessible to the public by making

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<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Mason Bolick, "Digital Archives: Democratizing the Doing of History," *International Journal of Social Education* 21, no. 1 (2006): 122–136.

<sup>2</sup> "Gallantry Awards Portal," Ministry of Defence, Government of India, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/>.

it easy to navigate through, while simultaneously encouraging increased engagement with the archives. The Gallantry Awards Portal project, was conceived in 2017 and substantively revamped by the Ministry of Defence in December 2021, the portal offers a public-domain digital repository of Indian Armed Forces personnel who have received these awards from 1947 onwards.<sup>3</sup>

As a digital archive, the Gallantry Awards Portal performs multiple roles—it preserves institutional memory, commemorates military sacrifice, educates the public, and more importantly, navigates the line between historical record and public engagement.<sup>4</sup> While the portal is not a substitute for official military records, its role as an interpretive layer between official documentation and public consumption, offering curated profiles, battle narratives, gazette citations, and multimedia resources, presents a curated history of military valour and operations. These features make it an ideal case study for understanding how digital archives shape collective memory in contemporary India.

This article is an attempt to explore the archival and historiographical implications of the project. It aims to investigate the portal not just as a historical database, but as a living, dynamic archive that constructs historical meaning, mediates between narrative frameworks, and invites user interaction.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the broader significance of such digital repositories in postcolonial countries, the portal can also be studied as a powerful tool that can be used for nation-building and, potentially, for selective

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<sup>3</sup> The Gallantry Awards bestow national honour by recognising and celebrating acts of bravery and sacrifice of the soldiers of the Armed Forces, other lawfully constituted Forces and civilians. After independence, three awards: Param Vir Chakra, Maha Vir Chakra and Vir Chakra, were instituted by the Government of India on 26 January 1950. Later, on 04 January 1952, three other Gallantry Awards were instituted, namely: Ashoka Chakra Class- I, Ashoka Chakra Class-II and Ashoka Chakra Class-III, later renamed as Ashoka Chakra, Kirti Chakra and Shaurya Chakra respectively. These awards are divided into two categories: War Time and Peace Time Awards.

<sup>4</sup> Muzamil Mushtaq, Salman Hafiz Rathore, and Nida Khan, "Archival Libraries and Digital Archiving: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Advanced Research in Library and Information Science* 10, no. 1 (2023): 1–15.

<sup>5</sup> Johanna Drucker, "DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly: Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface, 2013, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://dhq.digitalhumanities.org/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html>.

memorialisation.<sup>6</sup> Given the rapid expansion of public digital platforms in shaping historical consciousness, several questions arise about the neutrality, inclusivity, and long-term vision of such efforts, especially in the case of government-funded archives. Frameworks for such digital archiving emphasise not only accessibility and preservation, but also the shaping of collective narratives through metadata, design, and government approved structures.<sup>7</sup> This article, therefore, explores both the necessity and promise of such digital archives, along with the risks of their instrumentalisation for the creation of political narratives.

### **Archives and Military Memory**

The field of military history in India has traditionally been dominated by accounts produced by either the armed forces themselves or state-sponsored historians. The Gallantry Awards are frequently cited in official histories and public commemorations, yet they rarely receive any attention beyond anecdotal references and biographical tributes. Scholarship on war memorialisation in India has often been largely focused on physical monuments and commemorative events, leaving digital forms of remembrance largely under-explored.<sup>8</sup>

With its transformation in 2021, the Gallantry Awards Portal marked a decisive shift from a static commemorative site with limited functionality to a dynamic digital archive designed for structured data and historical accessibility. This transformation reflects a broader recognition of the need to consolidate fragmented and institution-bound official records into a comprehensive repository that is conveniently available, and more importantly, has the ability to speak not only to military institutions, but also researchers, educators, students, and the wider public.

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<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2\_Publishing, 2003): 14-25.

<sup>7</sup> National Information Standards Organization, *A Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections*, 2007, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.niso.org/sites/default/files/2017-08/framework3.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).



Figure 1: Gallantry Awards Portal Homepage<sup>9</sup>

The Gallantry Awards Portal draws on diverse officially authorised sources such as military records, official gazettes, award citations, regimental histories, war diaries, published accounts, and, where possible, personal testimonies. This phase of archival sourcing requires close verification against official records to ensure accuracy about conflicts and operations, spanning from the 1947–48 Indo-Pak War to the more recent operations such as Operation Sindoor. For earlier wars in particular, the challenge lies in standardising fragmentary information, reconciling inconsistencies across sources, and establishing a consistent format that would work across decades of military service records. At the moment, the portal has accounts of more than 4000 awardees, including 21 Param Vir Chakra, 211 Maha Vir Chakra, 1324 Vir Chakra, 97 Ashoka Chakra, 483 Kirti Chakra and 2107 Shaurya Chakra awardees.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these, new names are added every year on Republic Day and Independence Day.

The revealing accounts of gallantry awardees stand out as an important aspect of the portal. Each account is structured to balance the demands of the database architecture with narrative depth, and it typically combines data such as rank, regiment, date of award, and decoration with interpretive content in the form of citations, biographical notes, and battle summaries, with a large part focusing on individual action and personal bravery. This data is supplemented with captioned photographs to make the portal more appealing

<sup>9</sup> Government of India, “Gallantry Awards Portal,” accessed on September 28, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Gallantry Awards Portal,” accessed on September 28, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/>.

to the general public. In addition to these curated accounts, the portal also includes write-ups on major battles and operations conducted by the Indian Armed Forces, along with rare archival maps, photographs, and battle plans drawn from official histories, regimental records, and the Ministry of Defence's personal collection of archives and photographs. Such additions of contextual data enrich the portal's content and broaden its value as both a research source and a public platform.

The metadata design of the archive supports the granular searches by name, year, unit, or award, while also enabling thematic browsing by campaign, conflict, or operation, hence facilitating the ability to search for and retrieve data on a detailed level. Use of such metadata makes the accessibility of the portal convenient and also adds on to its reach and popularity among people. Studies related to digitisation within Indian archival institutions also help to show the manner in which technical and curatorial decisions become inseparable from the broader questions of standardisation, infrastructure, and sustainability.<sup>11</sup> The Gallantry Awards Portal thus, fills a significant gap in both public and scholarly knowledge. By bringing together digitised citations, biographical data, and war histories in a format that is accessible to researchers, educators, students, and the general public, it facilitates a rethinking about the structures, narratives, and consumption of military memory in India's digital public sphere. More importantly, it opens a new space for critical engagement with the politics of memory by asking who gets remembered, how, and by whom.

### **Accessing and Developing an Archive**

Despite these strengths, the curation of the Gallantry Awards Portal also reveals challenges that are inherent within state-led archives. The curatorial guidelines for archival projects are typically established in the beginning to maintain uniformity and sensitivity with regard to representation. In the case of institutional or governmental archives, such guidelines often come with limitations. With the Gallantry Awards Portal, the entries are enriched but

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<sup>11</sup> Akhlak Ahmad and Swadesh Sharma, "Digitisation of Archival Records at National Archives of India and Department of Delhi Archives: A Detailed Study of Methods, Standards and Protocols," *NVEO - NATURAL VOLATILES & ESSENTIAL OILS Journal* 8, no. 5 (September 17, 2024): 5169–5177.

they adhere, rather strictly, to the official documents and sources. This approach, drawing from historical records and official data available in the public domain, has enabled the portal to evolve from being a commemorative listing of gallantry awardees to an archive backed by legitimate research. At the same time, it has also limited the chances of developing both an interpretive space and engaging critically with the politics of memory and representation.

Sustainability remains a pressing concern for all forms of archives. In their digital format, this issue has become more serious since they require institutional commitment, steady funding, and technological maintenance. Without these, such platforms risk the dangers of being outdated. Although the Gallantry Awards Portal has benefited from state sponsorship, its long-term viability depends on whether future governments will continue to support it while facilitating its adaptation to evolving technological standards.<sup>12</sup> Today, such concerns have initiated wider discussions regarding digital preservation, where archives are valued not only for their instant accessibility but also for their ability to survive technological shifts and political changes. Additionally, this also prompts us to think of sustainability not simply as a technical issue, but as a political and institutional concern as well.<sup>13</sup>

Recent works in archival theory and digital humanities, such as those by Antoinette Burton,<sup>14</sup> Arjun Appadurai,<sup>15</sup> and Francis Blouin,<sup>16</sup> have interrogated the construction and mediation of archives, particularly in postcolonial states. These studies highlight how archives are never neutral;

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<sup>12</sup> Samir Chattopadhyay, "Digital Preservation In The Twenty First Century: Concept, Needs, Problems And Solutions," accessed September 26, 2025, <https://ir.inflibnet.ac.in/server/api/core/bitstreams/058acf2c-b440-4b4b-9fb7-ecf0976890a9/content>.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Cunningham, Margaret Proctor, Michael Cook and Caroline Williams, "Political Pressure and the Archival Record," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 38, no. 2 (June 2007): 155–57.

<sup>14</sup> Cunningham, Proctor, Cook, Williams, "Political Pressure", 155-57.

<sup>15</sup> Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration", 14-25

<sup>16</sup> Nupur Chaudhuri, Francis X. Blouin, Jr., and William G. Rosenberg, "Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives," *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (September 21, 2012): 1181–81.

instead, they are shaped by power, access, and intention.<sup>17</sup> Parallely, digital archive theorists like Johanna Drucker and Ricardo Punzalan have emphasised the performative and participatory potential of online archival platforms for their depth and richness.<sup>18</sup> In the last few years, research on digital curation has also pointed to the uneven standards of digitisation across institutions, often funded by governments, with several problems related to metadata practices, long-term preservation, and technical infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

In the Indian context, initiatives like the Prime Minister’s Museum & Library’s digital archives (formerly the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library’s digital archives), the Indian Memory Project, and the 1947 Partition Archive act as digital tools aimed at democratising access to historical records and memories. However, very few such efforts focus specifically on military history. If we look at our archival institutions, the studies on digitisation at the National Archives of India and Delhi Archives underscore both the promise and fragility of these initiatives. While progress in this field is visible, systemic constraints continue to shape what gets digitised, how it is presented, and to whom it is accessible.<sup>20</sup>

Comparative scholarship on pedagogy and digital archives further suggests that archives function not only as repositories but also as a tool for civic education. The design, accessibility, and public interactivity shape how younger generations see history. This makes archival repositories an active source of learning, along with historical preservation. Such a perspective can be crucial for assessing the Gallantry Awards Portal Project that aims to achieve national outreach, but continues to remain institutionally curated. Compared to similar efforts carried out in other countries, such as the United

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<sup>17</sup> Chaudhuri, Blouin, Rosenberg, “Processing the Past,” 1181–81.

<sup>18</sup> Johanna Drucker, “DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly: Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface, 2013, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://dhq.digitalhumanities.org/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html>.

<sup>19</sup> National Information Standards Organization, A Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections, 2007, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.niso.org/sites/default/files/2017-08/framework3.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmad and Sharma, “Digitisation of Archival Records,” 5169–5177.

States' Library of Congress's Veterans History Project,<sup>21</sup> and the UK's National Army Museum<sup>22</sup> and The National Archives,<sup>23</sup> the Gallantry Awards Portal remains more institutional and gazette-citation-driven. It lacks oral histories and individual storytelling. These international examples present alternative archival models that emphasise community memory and participatory documentation, in addition to the need of expanding public engagement. Institutional and political factors continue to influence decisions about what should be disclosed, how contested conflicts should be framed, and how much information should be included. What the portal can, and cannot, say is unavoidably shaped by these restrictions. Yet, precisely because of these limitations, the portal offers insight into the possibilities and constraints of digital archiving in India. It shows how military memory can be systematised, while also demonstrating how archival practice is still entangled with state narratives and silences.<sup>24</sup>

### **Interface and Representation: Reading the Portal as an Archive**

Digital archives have shifted the dynamics of historical research by changing who is able to conduct research and how it is done.<sup>25</sup> As a digital archive, the Gallantry Awards Portal is more than just a compilation of the names and actions of notable people; it is a thoughtfully designed user interface, developed to give users a particular kind of historical experience. The types of narratives it favours and the ways users engage with them are largely determined by its layout, metadata structure, search filters, and presentation logic. The portal's bilingual interface (in Hindi and English) is one of its primary features, demonstrating its dedication towards inclusivity and wide accessibility. The homepage opens with rotating banners that commemorate anniversaries such as Kargil Vijay Diwas, Republic Day, or the 1971 War

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<sup>21</sup> "About | Veterans History Project | Programs | Library of Congress," Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., accessed September 27, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/veterans-history-project/about-this-program/>.

<sup>22</sup> "Home | National Army Museum," National Army Museum, accessed 28 September, 2025, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/>.

<sup>23</sup> "The National Archives - Homepage," The National Archives, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-soldiers-in-service-after-1918/>.

<sup>24</sup> Burton. *Archive Stories*.

<sup>25</sup> Bolick, "Digital Archives" 122–36.

victory, along with links that direct users to a particular collection. This anchors user engagement with a proper chronology of patriotic memory.<sup>26</sup>

The website is structured around searchability and data classification. Users can locate gallantry awardees by name, war/operation, year, service, decoration, and regimental unit. This taxonomical approach, which emphasises accuracy and systematisation, reflects both military organisation and archival logic. However, each profile also humanises the subject, often accompanied by a photograph, a summary citation, and a biographical narrative. This dual structure consisting of both a database and biographical information, situates the portal at the intersection of an archival record and a memorial tribute.<sup>27</sup>

The portal functions as both a source and an interpretive frame from an archival standpoint. It reproduces official citations of awards, which are often terse and formulaic, but situates them within contextual narratives put together and authored by researchers. This layering enables multiple readings; one can interpret the awardee's act either through the lens of military doctrine, historical context, or emotional resonance. In this sense, the interface does not passively preserve history but, as Antoinette Burton has argued, it renews itself through a variety of new interpretive frameworks.<sup>28</sup> Design choices of archives are never neutral. Nature of its curation and interface design shapes how users encounter history, a point reinforced by scholarship on archives and pedagogy.<sup>29</sup> For anyone accessing the archive, it acts as a contact zone between the past and the present, as well as between researchers and structures of local, national, and global power.<sup>30</sup> In this zone, the interface enables not only access but civic and historical learning to users, as well.

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<sup>26</sup> Johanna Drucker, "DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly: Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface, 2013, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://dhq.digitalhumanities.org/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Ricardo Punzalan, "Archival Diasporas: A Framework for Understanding the Complexities and Challenges of Dispersed Photographic Collections," *The American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (October 2014): 326-349.

<sup>28</sup> Burton, "Archive Stories", 18.

<sup>29</sup> Robert B Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," *The Journal of Education* 189, no. 1/2 (2008): 159-67.

<sup>30</sup> Burton. *Archive Stories*.

The limitations of the portal are also made clear by certain design choices. The difficulties in striking a balance between openness, control, and accuracy are highlighted by the lack of download options available for photographs, limited operational metadata, and the insufficient original data for earlier wars and operations. Temporal framing is evident in how anniversaries and major wars like 1971, and Kargil are given prominent attention, while conflicts like 1962 remain more marginal. Spatially, the possibility of comprehending regional aspects of warfare is reduced by the absence of a user-interactive map that links accounts to combat geographies. The absence of such features highlights the ethical dilemmas of institutional digital preservation, where choices about what to emphasise or exclude carry lasting consequences for how history is remembered.

### **Public Engagement and its Limits**

Public engagement is where the Gallantry Awards Portal reveals both its promise and its limits. As outlined in the previous section, the interface organises military memory into a searchable and accessible structure. Yet, how users interact with that structure, what they can contribute, learn, or question defines the archive's social and civic value. At present, engagement on the portal is mostly symbolic. The most prominent interactive features are the 'Pledge' and 'Tribute' sections, where citizens can affirm loyalty to the nation or pick one of the formulaic messages of gratitude from the options and post it. These gestures create affective ties to military sacrifice and are, therefore, commemorative in character. However, in hindsight, they risk reducing participation to ritualised, state-choreographed performances of memory. The objectivity of the archive also comes into picture here. As with digital collections, especially in present times, it is evidently clear that public-facing archives can either open spaces for collective remembering or reinforce authorised scripts of patriotism.<sup>31</sup> In the case of the Gallantry Awards portal, the balance appears to tilt towards the latter.

However, the absence of participatory mechanisms is particularly striking. Users are unable to submit family stories, upload photos, or make corrections,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 157.

unlike the 1947 Partition Archive<sup>32</sup> and the US Veterans History Project.<sup>33</sup> This leaves little room for oral histories or community memory to interact with official documentation, reinforcing the fact that digitisation projects in India have long faced challenges of inclusivity and transparency.<sup>34</sup> This system reminds one of linear transmission models of communication where there is no space for interaction. This one-way flow of information positions citizens as recipients rather than collaborators. If we take up its educational role, the portal remains underdeveloped. Digital archives hold the capability to foster historical thinking by encouraging users to cross-check sources, identify gaps, and interpret their contexts.<sup>35</sup> The Gallantry Awards Portal, however, leans more towards patriotic messaging than analytical framing. While it succeeds in widening access to military sources, it misses an opportunity to cultivate analytical learning and critical reflection on military history.

The ineluctable vulnerability of archives to political whim and social upheaval is something that they cannot be free from. Upon looking back at its long-term sustainability, a state-led archive often risks becoming vulnerable to political shifts, which can further narrow the scope of representation, and reframe historical narratives to fit prevailing ideologies.<sup>36</sup> Anchoring the portal within a framework of multi-institutional custodianship and transparent practices, could be helpful in strengthening its future. All things taken into account, the Gallantry Awards Portal has been successful in bringing military history to the general public; however, its current model of engagement remains limited. To realise and necessarily utilise its full potential, the portal must move beyond symbolic gestures toward participatory, educational, and sustainable frameworks. It should be equipped enough to focus more on participatory, yet

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<sup>32</sup> "1947 Partition Archive", accessed September 29, 2025, <https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/>.

<sup>33</sup> "About | Veterans History Project | Programs | Library of Congress," Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., accessed September 29, 2025, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/veterans-history-project/about-this-program/>.

<sup>34</sup> Meena Gautam, "History of Archives and Archival Sciences from 1950 Onwards Based on Indian Practices," *Atlanti* 23, 2013: 135-147. accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.ijas-trieste-maribor.eu/wp-content/uploads/atti/2013/gautam.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Robert B Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," *The Journal of Education* 189, no. 1/2 (2008): 159-67.

<sup>36</sup> Andy Inch, "An Archive of Political Possibilities?," *Planning Theory & Practice* 24, no. 3 (May 27, 2023): 301-3.

carefully curated models of engagement. The following case study examines selected profiles to test these observations against the portal's actual content and structure.

### Awardee Accounts: A Case Study of Entries

To test the observations developed in the preceding sections, I have taken a small set of five profiles from the Gallantry Awards Portal to see where institutional memory becomes public history, and where the strengths and limits of the archive reveal themselves most clearly. The selection was designed for studying diversity across award categories, service branch, rank, and time period. The profiles analysed are those of Major Padmapani Acharya (Maha Vir Chakra, Kargil 1999),<sup>37</sup> Air Commodore Harcharan Singh Mangat (Maha Vir Chakra, 1971),<sup>38</sup> Second Lieutenant R. S. Bedi (Vir Chakra, 1965),<sup>39</sup> Havildar Potharaj (Vir Chakra, 1965),<sup>40</sup> and Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat (Maha Vir Chakra, 1962).<sup>41</sup> Taken together, these accounts provide a lens to assess how the portal translates official records into accessible digital form and how it balances completeness, contextualisation, and public accessibility, while also exposing the unevenness in curation that shapes the historical experience.

Patterns emerge quickly. The recent and high-profile awardees, such as Major Acharya of the Indian Army, represent the portal at its most effective. This account offers a clear biographical sketch, photographs, and operational context relating to the Battle of Tololing during the Kargil War. Formal citations are interspersed with family memories to create a multi-layered narrative that is both educational and commemorative. The richness here, however, reflects not only archival effort but also the prominence of Kargil in

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<sup>37</sup> "Major Padampanni Acharya, MVC" Gallantry Awards Portal, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/1503>.

<sup>38</sup> "Air Commodore Harcharan Singh Mangat," Gallantry Awards Portal, accessed 28 September, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/4236>.

<sup>39</sup> "Second Lieutenant R S Bedi," Gallantry Awards Portal, accessed 28 September, 2025, <https://www.gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/3160>.

<sup>40</sup> "Havildar Potharaj," Gallantry Awards Portal, accessed 28 September, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/3179>.

<sup>41</sup> "Rfn Jaswant Singh Rawat" Gallantry Awards Portal, accessed 28 September, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/1237>.

national memory and the relative abundance of available sources. In contrast, older or less celebrated cases, such as those of Second Lieutenant Bedi and Havildar Potharaj from the 1965 War, contain little beyond the official citation and provide minimal service information. This disparity confirms that recency, prominence, and availability of secondary sources strongly influence the depth of digital representation, a pattern well documented in studies of digitisation in India.<sup>42</sup> The potential of the project is also demonstrated by Indian Air Force Awardee Air Commodore Harcharan Singh Mangat's profile. His actions during the 1971 air operations are described with tactical precision and accompanied by visual evidence. The profile is especially useful for researchers and students because it combines operational detail with a biographical narrative. However, as with Major Acharya's account, this depth remains selective. The completeness of certain profiles derives from the availability of documentation and the visibility of the war itself, rather than a uniform curatorial method. The metadata practices further show unevenness. Rank styling, date formats, and unit names are inconsistent across entries, complicating efforts to query the database systematically. Air Commodore Mangat's records include operational framing, but lack standardised metadata that would allow comparative analysis across conflicts. Archival frameworks emphasise the need for controlled vocabularies and provenance fields to ensure long-term usability,<sup>43</sup> but the portal does not yet fully implement such practices.

Havildar Potharaj's account stands in stark contrast to this. His entry from the 1965 conflict contains little more than official service details and the award citation, with no photographs, no background information, and no indication of supplementary research. Such skeletal profiles are factually accurate but reveal the limits of an archive built largely on the basis of official notifications. The disparity reinforces hierarchies of remembrance—higher-ranking or more celebrated figures receive fuller representation, while enlisted men and earlier conflicts are reduced to bureaucratic brevity. If we take Second Lieutenant Bedi's account, despite being a war awardee, his account has more photos and operational details compared to Havildar Potharaj, a non-commissioned

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<sup>42</sup> Ahmad and Sharma, "Digitisation of Archival Records," 5169–5177.

<sup>43</sup> National Information Standards Organization, *A Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections*, 2007, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://www.niso.org/sites/default/files/2017-08/framework3.pdf>.

soldier. This presents details and official presentation preserved by the government, and is indicative of the preference given to higher ranks within the institutional archive. The official framework preserves hierarchy even in memory where visual evidence, extended write-ups, and operational detail are unevenly distributed. The absence of such depth in Havildar Potharaj's profile illustrates both the gaps in representation and the need for supplementary sources to recover fuller narratives of the selected awardees. The framing of narratives associated with certain awardees reveals further tensions. Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat's account, for example, leans heavily on regimental legend. He is a celebrated figure of the 1962 Sino-India War, immortalised in regimental folklore and memorial culture. The portal records his valour but leaves the larger context of the war unexamined. As a result, in order to maintain the heroic, mythical image of the individual, the narration has silenced the complexities of a politically sensitive and militarily contested war. Here, the archive reveals its dual burden: navigating the silences imposed by institutional and political constraints while also honouring service and sacrifice. Major Acharya's profile, on the other hand, places individual bravery within the Battle of Tololing, showing how linking profiles to campaigns and geographies can enrich both commemoration and scholarship. However, such contextualisation is currently irregular.

A few more patterns become evident from these examples. The richness of profiles varies by rank, prominence of specific wars, and how recent they are. The profiles taken here are primarily related to wartime awardees. The level of detail decreases drastically in the case of civilian recipients, particularly of those bestowed with the Kirti Shaurya Chakra. For civilians, unless they are tied to a widely publicised national incident, the availability of information is often limited to the official citation and, in most cases, merely a single photograph. As a result, the background, contextualisation and relatability diminish considerably in these records. Across these accounts, the provenance metadata is inconsistently presented. Some entries cite official notifications or secondary sources, while others do not. The absence of participatory channels compounds these issues. None of the examined profiles integrate oral histories, even though the infrastructure for such contributions could expand the archive's reach.

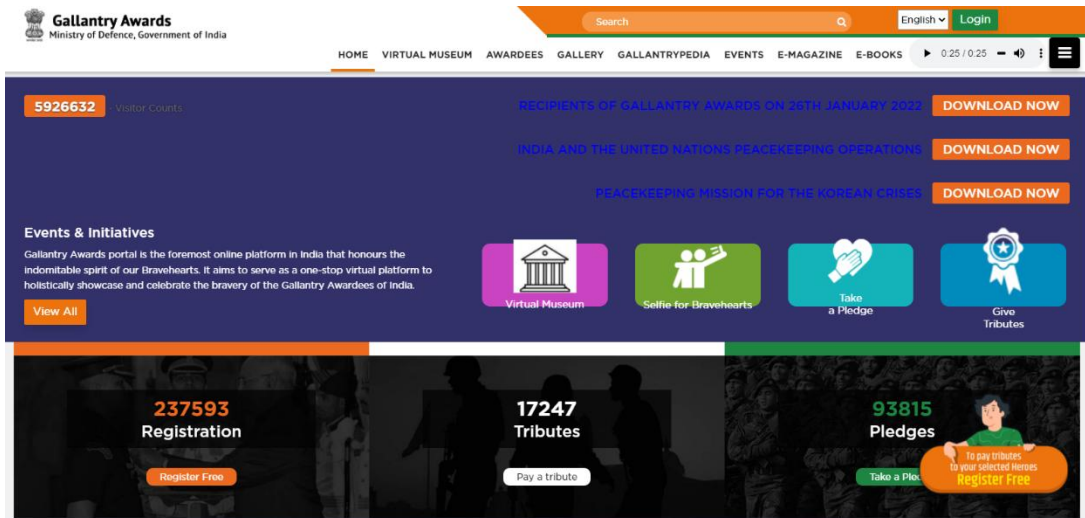


Figure 2: Gallantry Awards Portal Webpage<sup>44</sup>

As mentioned at the outset of this essay, comparative projects like the Partition Archive and the US Veterans History Project demonstrate how moderated user input strengthens depth and inclusivity. By restricting users to pledges and tributes, the Gallantry Awards Portal limits itself to symbolic engagement, and gives precedence to authority and consistency over plural memory. Furthermore, the profiles highlight sustainability-related issues. In the case of administrative or political changes, if the archive is deprioritised or its narrative framing is altered, carefully chosen entries run the risk of being compromised. Discourses on digital preservation have emphasised that multi-institutional custodianship, open editorial procedures, and technical solutions are not the only factors that ensure continuity of an archive.<sup>45</sup> With such a portal, the risk of even the most robust profiles being susceptible to institutional changes in the absence of such protections is very much possible.

These examples suggest both the value and the limitations of the portal. Addressing these gaps would not require abandoning the portal's commemorative function. Rather, modest steps like consistency in metadata and provenance, in addition to carefully moderated avenues for

<sup>44</sup> Government of India, "Gallantry Awards Portal."

<sup>45</sup> Samir Chattopadhyay, "Digital Preservation In The Twenty First Century: Concept, Needs, Problems And Solutions," accessed September 26, 2025, <https://ir.inflibnet.ac.in/server/api/core/bitstreams/058acf2c-b440-4b4b-9fb7-ecf0976890a9/content>.

supplementary contributions from families and regimental institutions, could enhance both scholarly utility and public depth of the portal towards a more robust digital archive of India's military history.

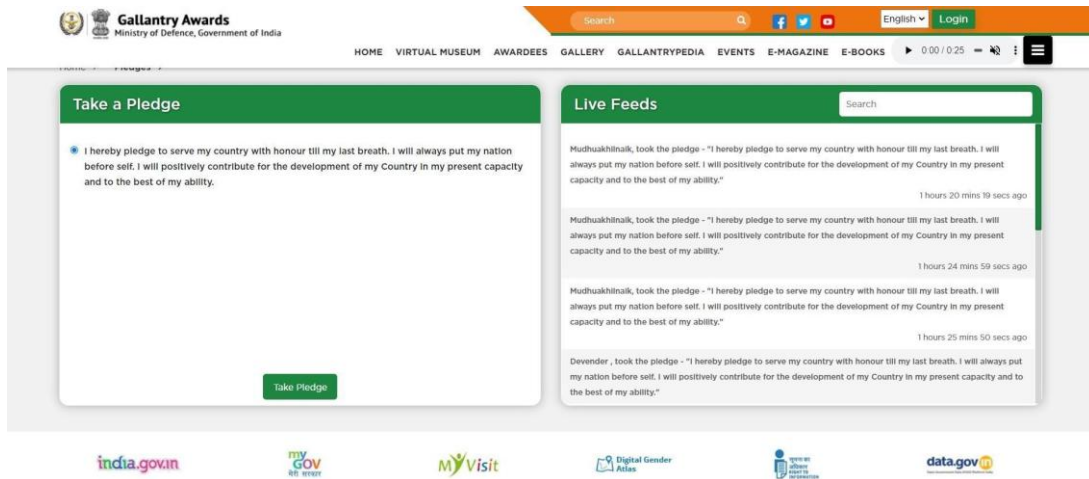


Figure 3: Gallantry Awards Portal homepage and Pledge section<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion: Commemoration, Archive, and the Politics of Memory

The Gallantry Awards Portal stands as a landmark within India's digital military historiography. It consolidates fragmented records into a single, publicly accessible platform and, at its best, produces accounts that honour sacrifice while making post-independence military history visible to wider audiences. Its interface and accessibility represent a significant advance in the public history of the armed forces. However, this article's analysis highlights important limits. The case study shows that the data on awardees are not consistent. The famous and more recent recipients receive more detailed coverage, while lesser known or earlier recipients have been subjected to inadequate documentation. This also reflects how difficult it is to curate an archive in India owing to problems with institutional resources, record survival, and uneven infrastructure that affect what is kept and how it is shown.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Government of India, Gallantry Awards Portal, "Take a Pledge," accessed September 26, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/pledge>.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmad and Sharma, "Digitisation of Archival Records," 5169–77.

As an archive, the portal serves well as a medium for commemorating memory, but the lack of the prerequisite provenance fields and metadata makes it less trustworthy as a research archive. Implementation of strict curatorial criteria, provenance standards, and regulated vocabularies can be beneficial in improving the legitimacy and depth of the data.

The civic potential of the portal is severely underused. Archives can foster historical thinking by encouraging users to question sources, identify silences, and contextualise narratives, but the portal currently privileges patriotic affirmation over critical reflection. Opening moderated participatory channels can strengthen the inclusivity aspect of the portal. This will also position users from being passive recipients to becoming active contributors.

Sustainability is perhaps the most pressing concern, as we all are well aware of the pressure politics puts on the past. State sponsorship provides authority but makes the archive vulnerable to shifting political priorities.<sup>48</sup> As stressed earlier, technological solutions alone are insufficient. To avoid instrumentalisation, continuity necessitates editorial independence, multi-institutional custodianship, and transparent governance. Without these protections, the archive runs the risk of becoming not only brittle but also a platform for propaganda and selective memory.

The Gallantry Awards Portal, therefore, occupies an ambivalent position. Despite being a valuable medium in democratising access to military memory, its potential as a scholarly, civic, and educational resource is constrained by uneven curation, limited participatory structures, and fragile sustainability. The path forward could involve acknowledging both its achievements and silences. If utilised properly, the Gallantry Awards Portal has the potential to move beyond commemoration and become a potent digital military archive that helps citizens, educators, and historians alike.

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<sup>48</sup> Mike Steemson, "Conference Report: Political Pressure and the Archival Record - History & Policy," *History & Policy*, accessed September 28, 2025, <https://historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/conference-report-political-pressure-and-the-archival-record/>.

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