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Sustaining an Open-Access Journal: Lessons for the Future

YOGESH SNEHI & SHAILAJA MENON
Managing Editors, *Reading the Archive*

The inaugural event of *Reading the Archive* was held on 14 September 2025 at the India International Centre, New Delhi. The formal release of the first volume of the journal was followed by a special lecture by Prof. Madhavan K. Palat on 'Genocide: Barbarism in Civilization in the Twentieth Century'. The lecture was chaired by Prof. Salil Misra and was attended by a wide fraternity of established and budding scholars. It was seen as a promising enterprise for the future of graduate student research, encouraging a strengthened resolve for sustained efforts to carry forward this endeavour.

Much has changed since the publication of the maiden issue of *Reading the Archive*. The sudden surge in the use of generative AI (artificial intelligence)-based tools in academic writing poses serious ethical and methodological challenges for the future of academic journals. The accessibility of this technology has impacted the nature of submissions, invariably bearing the imprint of AI. Almost all submissions make use of AI software — ranging from various versions of ChatGPT to Grammarly — for refinement of language. This dynamically evolving challenge must be viewed through the lens of opportunity and ethical responsibility. There exists a substantive debate about who holds the copyright over content created by AI tools. For a new academic journal that seeks to establish a benchmark for research undertaken by young scholars, the ethical need for human-generated academic content is fundamental to sustaining a viable future for the journal.

There are a variety of positions on the use of AI software for academic learning, ranging from dismissiveness to whole-hearted embrace. However, there is little nuance in these binary discussions. One is reminded of similar debates at the dawn of the Internet age in the early twenty-first century. Like the internet and the advent of email, there do not seem to be any possibilities for the reversal of AI technology. The fundamental question, however, is

whether this will bring redundancy to the academic enterprise. These were the very questions being asked when Google occupied *Britannica's* space. The questions of veracity and verifiability of content on the internet remain relevant in the age of AI as well. These questions must also have been relevant when token currency was replacing gold and silver, and when memory was transitioning to print capitalism. To address some of these concerns, the editors of the journal made it mandatory for all authors to voluntarily declare the nature and extent of the use of AI in their submissions. The journal is yet to evolve a policy on the ethical use of AI, and this acknowledgement is merely a first step towards addressing this challenge.

The present issue has contributions spanning across and intermingling with a variety of disciplines. This, to us, is an encouraging sign, since the journal continuously seeks to expand the boundaries of what constitutes an archive. We have research papers focusing on performance archives, postal services, archival practices, letters, the visual archives of 1857, memory, women-led peace movements, gallantry awards, opium smuggling, and the epics. A Hindi translation of a hitherto lesser-known essay by Hegel, published in 1808, is a first. The reviews also cover a wide range of themes in anthropology, literature, archival studies, history, political science, film, and museum studies. We wish to sustain this ebb and flow of thematic variety and hence, foster the convergence of disciplinary boundaries while also encouraging the exploration of new themes within the multifarious domains of archival research.

From *Transfer of Power* to *Towards Freedom*: Envisioning and Documenting the Indian Independence

SALIL MISRA
Guest Editor, *Reading the Archive*

Historical documents, both official and non-official, play a seminal role in the construction of historical knowledge. But the manner in which these documents are catalogued and classified also shapes the trajectory and the orientation of historical research. In this context, a comparison between two different documentation ventures on Indian independence can be very instructive. The British government sponsored the publication of a large number of documents related to India's independence, available at the India Office in London. They were organised under the title The Transfer of Power and contained the story of India's independence from a British perspective. In response to this, another set of documents titled Towards Freedom was published in India, offering an Indian perspective on India's independence.

Keywords: Towards Freedom, Transfer of Power, Indian Independence, Partition, British Colonialism, Pakistan

I

This is the second issue of *Reading the Archive* (*RTA*). The articles included in this issue represent the long and diverse journey of history as a discipline and a vocation. History predates the social sciences by a few centuries, but it emerged in a new avatar in the 19th century, as an inseparable component of the social sciences. It acquired social prestige and a unique paradigmatic aspect in two ways. First, it became sufficiently discontinuous from earlier ways of looking at the past, internally consensual, and sufficiently open-ended. Finally, it also developed fairly sharp and identifiable boundaries from other disciplines, in addition to a break from other ways of looking at the past.

As part of the new thinking, it was believed that just as the natural world was open to exploration and manipulation, so was the human world. This was

virtually the *a priori* belief of 19th century orthodoxy. A basic premise of this orthodoxy was that there existed a world of humans, independent of human subjectivities, while simultaneously existing outside this realm. The social scientists engaged in this intellectual activity were experts who had privileged access to this world. In short, they understood people better than people understood themselves. This was the crux of 'social causation', which became increasingly central to 19th century social sciences. Consensus was based on a neat separation between the theoretician and the social actors that were being studied. These social actors performed things (for instance, say, reinforcing the social structure, leading a protest struggle, or working for the status quo) *without* the conscious knowledge that their actions were circumscribed and shaped by structural or institutional forces. They were also unaware of the consequences, both intended and unintended, of their actions. It was the task of the expert to unravel this world. In simple terms, what people did was intertwined with both causes and consequences, but they did not know it. A 'discursive consciousness' separated the actor from the expert. The actor was devoid of it; the expert possessed it.

As mentioned in the introduction to the inaugural issue of the RTA, this paradigm, the orthodox or the mainstream view of the social sciences, was constructed in the 19th century and subjected to critique in the 20th century, particularly after the Second World War. However, it is significant to note that the critique of this paradigm was not accompanied by any alternatives. In the 19th century, the social sciences made certain claims and assertions. These were questioned, but not replaced by counter-assertions. A curious plurality replaced the earlier singularity of the mainstream social sciences. What Anthony Giddens has written in the context of sociology is equally applicable to the world of social sciences, in general, and history in particular:

> The orthodox consensus is today a consensus no more. It used to be a majority position in social sciences, but now has become a minority one…. Those who would now defend such a standpoint represent only one among a diverse range of perspectives. In its place stands a plurality of different theoretical perspectives – such as ethnomethodology, various forms of symbolic interactionism and neo-

> Weberianism, phenomenology, structuralism, hermeneutics, and critical theory – the list seems almost endless.[1]

The important point, however, is that multiple critiques of the mainstream social sciences are all united by what they are opposed to, but not much else. As such, it is difficult to see them as bound together by a common paradigm and the coherence that goes with it. This coherence was very central to the orthodox tenets of social science. The decolonisation and democratisation of social sciences effectively demolished the 19th century paradigm, but did not replace it with an alternative one.

However, there is one field in which critiques are particularly sharp. This pertains to the role of social actors in the making of social phenomena. Are these actors merely cogs in the large wheel, unaware of their role in the making of these phenomena and of the consequences of their actions? Are they intelligent beings, in possession of agency, reflexivity and discursive capacity? Or do they simply constitute one of the many elements in the giant wheel of historical movements, unaware of the consequences of their own actions? Anthony Giddens, while recognising the importance of "un-anticipated consequences", however, did grant much greater agency to the individual than was possible within orthodox social science: "The predictability of the social world does not just 'happen', as the predictability of the natural world does. It is brought about by the knowledgeably organized practices of human agents."[2]

Perhaps this ideational binary related to the place and role of social actors can be understood by symbolically classifying the various historical phenomena into the Renaissance-type and the Enlightenment-type. The social actors involved in the Renaissance had no awareness of their place or the fact that they were playing a part in creating one of the important breakthroughs in the history of Europe, and possibly that of the world. No leader of the Renaissance showed this awareness. The Renaissance, as a concept, was invented in the 19th century, which then imparted a great historical role to the social actors

[1] Anthony Giddens, "What is Social Science", in *In Defence of Sociology: Essays, Interpretations & Rejoinders,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 66.

[2] Ibid., 70.

involved in its development. These social actors fitted very well into the 19th century version of the social sciences.

Not so with the Enlightenment. Social actors displayed great awareness of their role in the making of the Enlightenment. They did not leave its theorisation to subsequent historians and sociologists. *They* were the sociologists of the Enlightenment. As actors, they made the Enlightenment, and as experts, they theorised upon it. Emmanuel Kant's seminal essay "What is Enlightenment", written in 1784, still remains one of the most articulate commentaries on this philosophical movement.[3] It should thus be clear that the social actor-theoretician separation, so central to the orthodox social sciences, obviously does not apply to the Enlightenment or other, similar phenomena. The practitioners of the phenomenon of nationalism, who played an important role in bringing forth its applicability and acceptability, were also often its theoreticians. However, all such actors-cum-theoreticians of such historical phenomena were obviously unaware of the influence they were going to have in subsequent times. The leaders of the Enlightenment understood their creation very well. But they had no idea about the fate of their ideas in the 19th and 20th centuries. That universe could only be unearthed by the sociologist and the historian of the Enlightenment.

II

There is a central episode of modern Indian history in which this binary does show up in a stark way. It involves the prolonged anti-imperialist nationalist struggle, launched over many decades, culminating in 1947 by way of India's independence. The actors and leaders of the movement also happened to be the major thinkers of their time, especially during the various stages of this struggle. The activities of the leaders of the nationalist movement reflect the entire range of mainstream social sciences and their subsequent critiques. They wrote, with great sophistication and scholarly rigour, on the three salient features of this struggle: the economic critique of British imperialism and the

[3] Two centuries later, in 1983, Michel Foucault wrote an essay with the same title "What is Enlightenment". The original essay, written by Kant in 1784, represented the theorisation of the phenomenon by someone who was also involved in it. Foucault's essay, on the other hand, represented a sociology of the same phenomenon.

highlighting of the economically exploitative character of the British rule,[4] the making of the Indian nation and their own role in it, and the making of a blueprint of India's future. Particularly during the active phase of the nationalist struggle (1920-47), there was a great correspondence between the principal activities that underlined the political struggle, and their subsequent theorisation, albeit in a popular language, by the political leadership of the movement. Some examples of this double role of the leadership include Gandhi, who led the Khilafat-non-cooperation movement (1920-22) and later also critiqued it. In fact, it was not unusual for Gandhi to initiate political activity and later subject it to criticism, much like a detached observer and scholar.

Jawaharlal Nehru played his part in popularising Indian nationalism and taking it to the people, but also critiqued it as essentially a middle-class phenomenon with all its limitations in his autobiography, written in 1936 during the course of the nationalist struggle.[5] Rajendra Prasad, as the leader of the nationalist movement, was obviously opposed to the demand for Pakistan, made by the Muslim League under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah in 1940. But he also produced an empirically rich and sociologically penetrating document on the Pakistan movement, bearing the title *India Divided*, two years before the making of Pakistan in 1947.[6] It was quite usual for the leaders of the nationalist movement to produce descriptive and explanatory accounts of the struggle they were all involved in. Leaders such as Lajpat Rai, Gandhi, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Subhash Chandra Bose, and J.B. Kripalani are only some of the important individuals who produced largely non-partisan accounts of the freedom struggle. It would be true to say that in the writings on the historiography of the Indian nationalist movement, a very significant proportion had to be devoted to those who fought the

[4] A comprehensive codification of this aspect was done by Bipan Chandra in his seminal work *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966). His work was based substantially on the writings of the nationalist leadership of the 19th century. Thus, 19th century leaders were both subjects and the important source for his enquiry.

[5] On how Nehru was the leader and scholar of the Indian National Movement, at the same time, see Irfan Habib "Jawaharlal Nehru's Historical Vision" in *The National Movement: Studies in Ideology & History* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2011), 38-57.

[6] Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, first published in 1946, republished by Penguin India, New Delhi, 2010.

struggle and wrote on it at the same time. Importantly, their writings do not simply constitute the self-image of the movement. They also offer an outside view, sometimes critiques and often sociological insights into the nationalist struggle. It should, thus, be clear that the social actor-theoretician separation does not really work in the case of the leaders of the nationalist struggle.

However, it is also true that certain dimensions of their activities were not very clear to them and were highlighted by professional social scientists only afterwards. While they could anticipate, and sometimes also predict, the outcome of their struggle, i.e., independence in some form or the other, none of them anticipated the Partition that accompanied Independence in 1947. During 1940-47, a large number of nationalist leaders wrote on the Partition, but none of them engaged in what could be considered a social scientist's gaze *vis-à-vis* the movement for Pakistan. A proper and comprehensive understanding of the Partition had to wait for professional historians and political scientists. The point is that the writings by the leaders of the nationalist movement tell us a great deal about the struggle. They were not just the spokespersons and mouthpieces of the struggle; they were also its scholars. They described the nature of the struggle, explained it and also anticipated the outcome. However, the counter-phenomenon of the nationalist movement, the movement for Pakistan, presents a different picture. Even though a large number of treatises and essays were written on it, they do not add up to a coherent and comprehensive picture of the movement for Pakistan. For an explanation and the delineation of the veins and arteries of the movement for Pakistan, one would have to turn to professional social scientists.[7]

III

It is for these reasons that the different sets of documents on the freedom struggle acquire salience. Given the nature of the struggle and the role and cognitive capacities of its leadership, these documents contain not just the self-image of the struggle, but significant commentaries on it as well. After

[7] A notable exception is B.R. Ambedkar's book *Thoughts on Pakistan,* written in 1941. Ambedkar's account comes closest to a social scientist's view of the movement, well before the making of Pakistan. But Ambedkar was not an active participant in either the movement for Indian independence or for Pakistan. He reserved for himself the role of an outside critic.

independence, the government of India took the initiative in publishing the selected, Collected Works of prominent leaders of the nationalist movement. As a result, nearly a hundred volumes, consisting of over fifty thousand pages of the speeches and writings, letters, telegrams, and personal notes of Mahatma Gandhi became available in the public sphere for students, researchers, journalists and other scholars of history. Likewise, selected works and correspondences of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai, Govind Vallabh Pant, Rajagopalachari, Acharya Narendra Dev and many others were compiled and published. This was nothing short of a great treasure for the students and researchers of the nationalist movement, who could easily reach out and gain access to the inner world of these leaders, their role in, and their view of, the nationalist movement. All of this was available in print.

Interestingly, one very big initiative in this direction was taken by the British government in the 1960s. In June 1967, the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson made the following declaration from the floor of the House of Commons: "In view of the great interest now being shown in historical circles in the last days of the British rule in India … [there would be published] documents from the India Office records on the Transfer of Power and the events leading up to it."[8] This was to be an independent project, undertaken by professional historians and funded by the government, but without any undue or unwarranted political interference by it. The India Office, located in London, was a great repository of official documents relating to India. Over the next decade, twelve big volumes consisting of all the notes and correspondences between the Viceroy and the Secretary of State (in charge of the India Office), between the Viceroys and Governors, fortnightly reports, and all the other important official documents on Indian politics produced between 1942 and 1947 were published. Each volume is divided into separate themes and contained nearly seven hundred documents.

Thus, researchers studying the climactic years leading to India's freedom and Partition got easy access to over eight thousand official documents on British thinking and policy making. The *Transfer of Power (ToP)* volumes contained

[8] Forward by Nicholas Mansergh, Editor-in-Chief, *The Transfer of Power 1942-47*, (Documents on the Constitutional Relations between Britain and India), Vol. I, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1970, IV.

very useful information on the principal episodes of the 1940s such as the Cripps Mission, the Quit India movement, India's entry into the Second World War, Bengal Famine, Simla Conference, the elections of 1946, Cabinet Mission, the Interim government, and the crucial period of Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, paving the way for Independence and Partition. The publication of the *ToP* documents greatly facilitated research on the major developments in Indian politics in the 1940s. There was a great spurt of scholarly works on this period in the 1980s. The easy availability of such a large number of important documents created a new interest in the 1940s and gave a boost to research pertaining to this period. Many new books started coming out from the late 1970s onwards, making good use of the *ToP* documents.[9] Interestingly, it was quite possible for two scholars to consult the same documents and arrive at entirely different conclusions.[10]

There were, however, some very serious shortcomings with the *ToP* volumes. By their very nature, the documents were limited to official, institutional accounts. They also contained the story of India's Independence from the British vantage point. This was implicit in the very name that was chosen for the series– the *Transfer of Power*. It saw Indian Independence as a mutually agreed-upon transfer of power from the British to Indian hands. The 'transfer of power' was a catchword that projected Indian independence as the result of a series of constitutional initiatives undertaken by the British since 1917, eventually leading to the transfer of power. In such a scheme, there was obviously no place for the anti-imperialist nationalist movement and its role in wresting independence from the British. This was nothing short of a blinkered perspective, which excluded the nationalist movement from the very frame in which the plot of Indian independence was set up.

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[9] Some of the important works are R.J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps and India, 1939-45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945); Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-47* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[10] Such was the case with Ayesha Jalal and Bimal Prasad. Both the scholars used the *ToP* documents and assigned a great causative value to the Second World War in completely changing the political equations involving the British, Muslim League and Congress. Yet they arrived at very different and contrasting conclusions regarding the constellation of factors that went into the making of the demand for Pakistan. See Bimal Prasad, *The March to Pakistan* (Volume III of the three-volume series on *Pathway to India's Partition*), (New Delhi: Manohar), 2009, 139-52, and Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, 57.

A significant corrective to this blinkered British-centric view was sought to be undertaken by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), a body set up by the Indian government in 1972 to promote historical research and documentation. The ICHR decided to compile and publish a series of volumes containing documents on the struggle for independence. The series was to be termed quite appropriately as *Towards Freedom (TF)*, which was to be the answer to the *Transfer of Power*. As was evident, the approach in this series was to see Indian independence not as a gift from the British, but as the result of the prolonged anti-imperialist nationalist struggle. Thus, *ToP* and *TF* became the templates for two rival perspectives on how to look at Indian Independence in 1947.

The *TF* series was different from the *ToP* in some crucial respects. First, the TF compiled the documents on Indian independence starting from the year 1937, when Congress contested elections to the provincial assemblies and formed governments in seven provinces. The *ToP* had treated 1942 as the starting point with the Cripps Mission, which was sent by the British government to resolve the Indian deadlock. Second, the *TF* did not see the period 1937-47 as merely one dominated by the imperialist-nationalist encounter. The series also contained documents on peasant movements, workers' struggles, women's question and various other popular struggles. In other words, the documents collected by the *TF* were to be much more diverse and multi-stranded. They were to focus on the popular dimensions of the struggle, not just the constitutional one. Third, it was also hoped that various important sources, available in Indian languages, would be translated into English and made accessible to the researchers.

The organisation of the *TF* volumes was done differently from the *ToP* volumes. The documents were to be assembled both thematically and chronologically, separately for each year. There was to be a general editor for the entire series. But the editorship of each year was assigned to a different historian. Prof. S. Gopal was the first General Editor, and after his death, Prof. S. Bhattacharya took over. The orientation of each volume differed in accordance with the thematic preferences of each historian. By contrast, the entire *ToP* series was edited by Nicholas Mansergh, a historian at the University of Cambridge. It was clear that the *TF* was a much more ambitious

project compared to the *ToP*, which was confined only to the documents available at the India Office. This was done in accordance with the fitness of things, as the major records of the nationalist movement were obviously available in India.

For various reasons, including a shortage of funds and government interference, the *TF* volumes took much longer to be completed, compared to the *ToP*. The first volume of the series appeared in 1985 and the last one in 2016, three decades later. The *ToP* volumes had been completed in a period of 12 years, from 1970 to 1982. Also, whereas the editors of the *ToP* volumes enjoyed complete freedom and encountered no obstacles from the British government, this was not the case with the *TF* volumes. The pendulum of fate of the *TF* volumes kept swinging from support to neglect to opposition, with the change in government at the Centre. Often, the volumes were withdrawn from the Press and subjected to outside scrutiny. There were times when the project ran out of funds and faced the prospect of either being shelved or closed. In the end, the project was declared closed in 2016, even though some crucial volumes for the years 1942 and 1947 were yet to be published.

IV

The story of two different ventures in the documentation of Indian independence is both interesting and instructive for the students of history. Making of the archives is not an innocent and neutral act of simply organising and storing important knowledge. A whole range of assumptions, *a priori* ideas, and perspectives and vision cast their shadows on how that knowledge is organised, the conceptual categories it is grouped under, and the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The students and researchers of history must know that when they enter the archives, they enter a field where a large number of decisions have already been taken, ultimately shaping the course of their research. It is a bit like joining a game of chess in which the first three or four moves have already been made and, as a result, have foreclosed some possibilities while creating openings for others.

However, it is also true that beyond a point, facts cannot speak for themselves and depend on the mediation of the researcher. In this sense, considerable autonomy and initiative rest with the researcher. The world of history writing,

with all its contestations and subjectivities, has also established rules, norms, conventions, procedures of enquiry and methodological preconditions. They both discipline and facilitate historical enquiry. The world of social sciences may be contentious in some crucial respects; it is not entirely devoid of consensual dimensions. Both the *ToP* and the *TF*, spread over some twenty thousand documents, contain some very important clues to a very crucial phase of Indian history. Their true potential is yet to be fully realised. It is hoped that the prospective contributors to the *RTA* would turn to these volumes and unearth important facets of India's social transformation during the 1930s and 1940s.

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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 cliche, 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 Chakravarty[1] 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 द 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.theccysc.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, 1947[6]

Figure 3: Two child survivors of the Rawalpindi Massacre, 1947[7]

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.

[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, 1947[9]

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.

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, 1940[11]

Figure 6: Cover of Anne Frank's Diary, 1942[12]

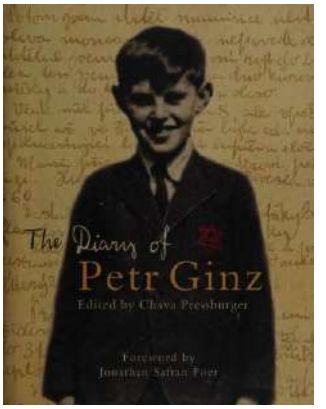

Figure 7: The Diary of Petr Ginz[13]

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:AnneFrankSchoolPhoto.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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Michlic Joanna Beata, Yuliya von Saal, and Anna Ulric. "Childhood during War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation." Introduction, *European Holocaust Studies* 5, (2024): 7-27. https://doi.org/10.46500/83535599.

Palat, Madhavan K. "Genocide: Barbarism in the Twentieth Century." Reading द Archive. Accessed September 27, 2025. YouTube video, 1:51:11. https://youtu.be/9p-9W5SK0xI?si=nrtVBywDHOyrn_kb.

[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.

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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.

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.[1] Within this continuously changing domain, the Gallantry Awards Portal project,[2] initiated by the Government of India, represents a significant effort to render post-independence Indian military history more accessible to the public by making

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

[2] "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.[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] 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

[3] 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.

[4] 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.

[5] 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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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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[6] 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.

[7] 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.

[8] Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Figure 1: Gallantry Awards Portal Homepage[9]

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.[10] 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

[9] Government of India, "Gallantry Awards Portal," accessed on September 28, 2025, https://gallantryawards.gov.in/.

[10] "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.[11] 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

[11] 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.[12] 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.[13]

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

[12] 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.

[13] 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.

[14] Cunningham, Proctor, Cook, Williams, "Political Pressure", 155-57.

[15] Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration", 14-25

[16] 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.[17] Parallelly, 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.[18] 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.[19]

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.[20]

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

[17] Chaudhuri, Blouin, Rosenberg, "Processing the Past," 1181–81.

[18] 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.

[19] 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.

[20] Ahmad and Sharma, "Digitisation of Archival Records," 5169–5177.

States' Library of Congress's Veterans History Project,[21] and the UK's National Army Museum[22] and The National Archives,[23] 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.[24]

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.[25] 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

[21] "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/.

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

[23] "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/.

[24] Burton. *Archive Stories.*

[25] 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.[26]

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.[27]

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.[28] 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.[29] 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.[30] In this zone, the interface enables not only access but civic and historical learning to users, as well.

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[26] 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.

[27] 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.

[28] Burton, "*Archive Stories*", 18.

[29] 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.

[30] 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.[31] 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,

[31] Ibid., 157.

unlike the 1947 Partition Archive[32] and the US Veterans History Project.[33] 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.[34] 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.[35] 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.[36] 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

[32] "1947 Partition Archive", accessed September 29, 2025, https://in.1947 partitionarchive.org/.

[33] "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/.

[34] 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.iias-trieste-maribor.eu/wp-content/uploads/atti/2013/gautam.pdf.

[35] 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.

[36] 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),[37] Air Commodore Harcharan Singh Mangat (Maha Vir Chakra, 1971),[38] Second Lieutenant R. S. Bedi (Vir Chakra, 1965),[39] Havildar Potharaj (Vir Chakra, 1965),[40] and Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat (Maha Vir Chakra, 1962).[41] 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

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

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

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

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

[41] "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.[42] 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,[43] 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

[42] Ahmad and Sharma, "Digitisation of Archival Records," 5169–5177.

[43] 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.

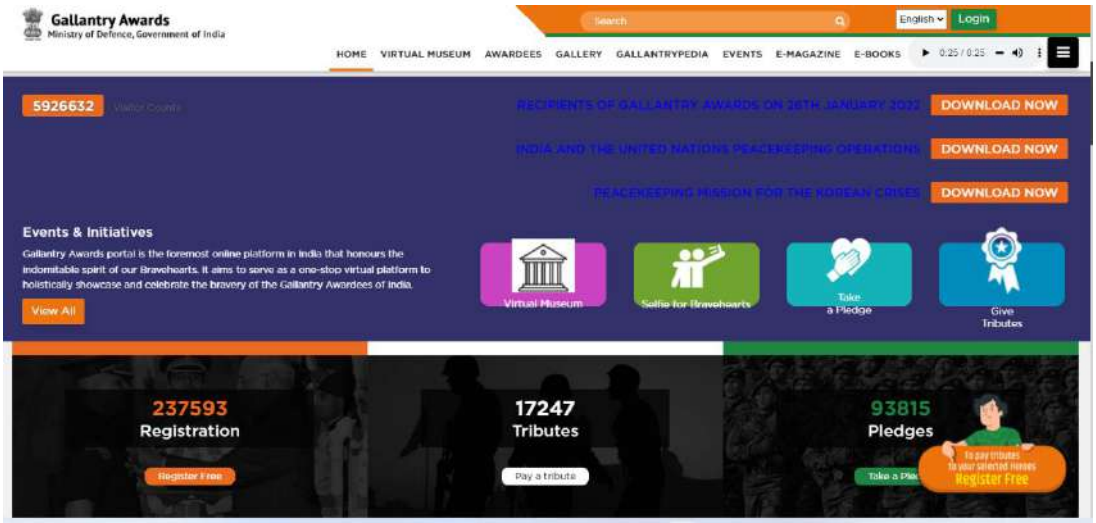

Figure 2: Gallantry Awards Portal Webpage[44]

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.[45] 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

[44] Government of India, "Gallantry Awards Portal."

[45] 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.

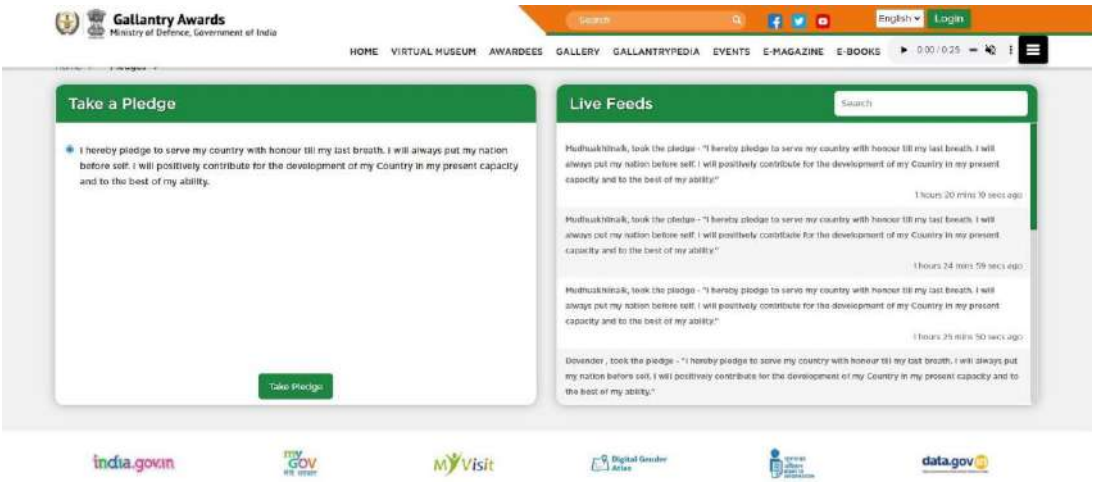

Figure 3: Gallantry Awards Portal homepage and Pledge section[46]

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.[47]

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

[47] 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.[48] 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.

[48] 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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The British "Brother" and the Travancore Sister: Reading Colonial Diplomacy in Archived Letters

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The aim of this study is to engage in a critical discourse analysis of an archival letter written by the Travancore regent, Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi, to the British Resident, Colonel McDowell, conveying her condolences on the death of King George III. An examination of the macrostructure of the letter reveals that it is primarily political rather than personal, despite the emotive language used. The linguistic strategies employed by the regent demonstrate how the discourse of domesticity is used to facilitate diplomatic relations with the British. Secondary sources also suggest that the relationship between the resident and the regent is characterised by mutual respect and benefit. The paper argues that the familial tone used by the regent served a broader political purpose of maintaining both the stability of the kingdom and her own political autonomy. The letter serves as a case study in the domain of colonial diplomacy and gendered language.

Keywords: Letter, British, Travancore, Domesticity, Discourse, Colonial diplomacy

Reading a Colonial Letter

The scholarly corpus on regent queens in colonial India highlights the exercise of soft power by the regents within the political discourse. These female monarchs secured their political positions by engaging in diplomatic relations with the British at a time when colonial expansion was at its peak. Archival records such as royal proclamations and the series of letters exchanged between the regents and the British residents at different instances provide evidence supporting this claim. One such archival record, dated 1820, is a letter written by Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi offering condolences on the death of King George III, addressed to the British Resident, Colonel McDowell, and accessed from the showcase library of the Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The present study tries to analyse the nature of the relationship between the British Resident and the regent. This study

attempts to engage in a critical discourse analysis of the letter to elucidate how the diplomatic language of the regent was instrumental in the political stability of the kingdom.

The letter dated 10th Mithunam 995 Malayalam Era (Figure 1) is addressed to the then British Resident, Colonel McDowell. The Malayalam Era 995 is converted to the English calendar by adding 825, which corresponds to the year 1820. The events mentioned in the record give an account of the historical events of that year. The letter consists of three main events and the Rani's responses corresponding to each: the demise of George III, the death of his fourth son, and the accession of the new King. It is understood from the very first line that this was a reply to one of the letters sent by the Resident, which conveyed the news of the demise of the British King George III. The following section presents my translation of the original Malayalam letter written by Gowri Parvati Bayi to Col. McDowell. My translation follows:

> **A letter of Rani Parvati Bayi to the Resident dated 10th Mithunam 995 M. E., offering condolences on the death of George III**[1]
>
> To Colonel McDowell Sahib Sir, who is more like a brother to me,
>
> I received the letter that carried the unfortunate news. I am deeply saddened by the news that was conveyed to me by the Colonel regarding the demise of George III, the king of the most revered British Empire. The King, who had served the nation for 60 years, passed away in the month of January, on the 29th at the age of 82. The news of the death of the King's fourth son on January 23, at the age of 53, has also deeply saddened me. However, I was extremely happy to read further that the son of the deceased King was declared the new King of the British Empire. People are bound to bear both the happiness and sadness that are vested upon us by the Almighty, and this thought reduced my worry about the sad news. I constantly pray to God Almighty that the mercy shown by the British government towards our State, and the mutual fondness that the two states share, may remain the same and that there be everlasting harmony. My children and I are

[1] Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi, letter to Colonel McDowell, 1820, Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, author's translation.

keeping very well. I hope the Colonel shall write to me about his well-being.

In the month when the snow falls.

Figure 1: The original Malayalam palm leaf showcased in the Central Archives.
Source: Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram

At a micro-level, the content of the letter historicises an event. The letter, sent to express condolences, in this sense is personal. However, since both the sender and the recipient of the letter are people in powerful positions, this makes the letter assume a political character at a macro-level. A critical discourse analysis bridges the gap between micro and macro approaches to a text, which is denoted by the interactional and institutional approaches respectively.[2] This study focuses on analysing the letter at a macro-level to unravel the politics of diplomacy employed in language.

The British "Brother"

The first section of the study critically examines the salutation of the letter with a view to locating it within the discourse of colonial domesticity. The queen's address to the Resident as a "brother," though seemingly innocent and personal on the surface, acquires importance when read against the larger colonial context (Figure 2). Colonial historiographer Partha Chatterjee

[2] Teun A. van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 468.

distinguishes between the material and spiritual realms in colonial discourse using a gender binary. He states that the external or material realm, which is masculine, is also where the West gained prominence, as opposed to the spiritual or inner realm that is defined as domesticated and feminine. He says,

> The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate.[3]

Therefore, Chatterjee advocated for the existence of a private realm, away from the politics of the British Raj, where the colonised subjects were able to assert a sense of autonomy. Colonial critic Judith Walsh also points out that "long before the nationalists began their political struggle with British imperialism, Partha Chatterjee has argued, they had produced a domain of sovereignty within colonial society itself, a domain which included the domestic world of women and the family."[4] Thus, Partha Chatterjee's "inner domain" of the house became a space where the familiar and the domestic, represented through the female figures, engaged in a discourse of power.[5]

Within colonial discourse, the domestic sphere was often constructed as a space of autonomy in contrast to the masculine domain of formal power politics, and this distinction is reflected in language, as is evident in the letter. Thus, the queen's address to the Resident as her "brother" immediately establishes a familial relationship, situating the exchange within the discourse of domesticity. The imbrication of politics and the familial can be traced back to the patrimonial state of the Mughal Empire. In this form of state organisation, the monarch assumes the role of a father who looks after the family or kingdom. According to Blake, patrimonial domination entails

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[3] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 121.

[4] Judith E. Walsh, "What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (August 1997): 641–77.

[5] Partha Chatterjee, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History (*New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 238.

"obedience to a person, not an office; it depends on the reciprocal loyalty between subject and master…"[6] The Travancore regent's letter can therefore be read as a continuum of this familial system of loyalty, with domestic language as the centre. It is significant that this mode of address was already seen in the reign of Queen Gowri Lakshmi Bayi, suggesting a continued use of kinship terminology as a strategic linguistic practice in communication with the British.

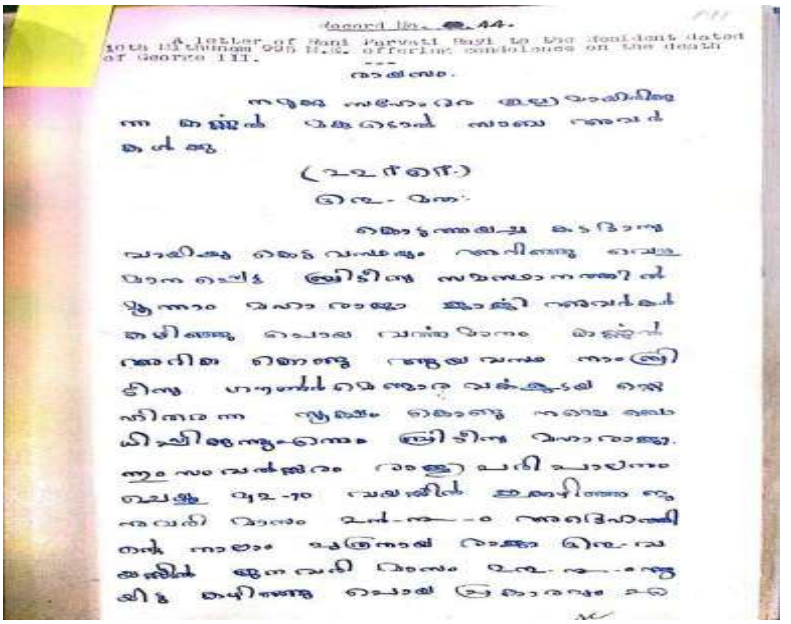

Figure 2: The transcription of the archived letter, Central Archives catalogue.
Source: Central Archives, Thiruvananthapuram

On the occasion of her accession to the musnud, Gowri Lakshmi Bayi delivered a formal address in which she referred to the Resident, Col. Munro as "*Ethreijum Bahumanapetta Sahabay* (i.e., very esteemed Sahib).[7] During the speech, she reverently submits herself to the care of the Resident:

> Being a young female quite unprepared and unqualified for such a high and responsible position, I cannot do better than to place myself under

[6] Stephen P. Blake, "The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic Empire of the Mughals," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Nov., 1979): 79.

[7] V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), 467.

> the guidance and support of the Honourable East India Company, whose bosom had been an asylum for the protection of an infant like Travancore, since the time Sri Padmanabhaswamy had effected an alliance with such a respectable Company of the European nation. To you, Colonel, I entrust everything connected with my country, and from this day I look upon you as my own elder brother and so I need say no more.[8]

In this address, the queen projects herself as a vulnerable woman through words like "unprepared" and "unqualified" and as being in desperate need of protection from someone more powerful than herself. She also adheres to the narrative that her kingdom required protection from the Company, thereby reinforcing the English justification of colonialism. Her admiration for the Company is strongly articulated and her explicit declaration of a brotherly relationship with the Resident was received favourably by the audience. It is noted in the contemporary accounts that the "speech made a deep impression on the minds of the European and native audience present."[9] The queen's attempt to cultivate intimacy and goodwill with the Resident is evident in these records. Historical records also testify that her intention to gain favours from the Resident was successful and their relationship continued to flourish throughout her reign.

It is significant to note that Gowri Lakshmi Bayi was still in charge of the matters related to the state. She maintained her political autonomy even after submitting herself to the care of the Company. The Rani had appointed the British Resident to be her Dewan, but she retained the management of the state "virtually in her own hands."[10] Thus, colonial regents were able to use a diplomatic strategy to legitimise their own autonomy in the governance of their kingdom. The language of affection and submission, instead of taking away the political autonomy of the Queen, legitimised it. For instance, Col. Munro in one of his letters mentions that "the executive administration in Travancore should not only be conducted with integrity and zeal but that the people in general, and more especially Her Highness the Rani and the party attached to her interests, should have the means of knowing that it is

[8] Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, 467.
[9] Ibid., 457.
[10] Ibid., 460.

conducted in that manner."[11] This is indicative of the fact that the Resident was also pleased with Rani's conduct and included her in matters of state. From the Resident's letter, it is evident that the change in the Resident did not alter the relationship between the Resident and the regent. Gowri Lakshmi Bayi's successor continued the tradition of evoking familial sentiments with the Resident by addressing him as brother.

Through clear lexical choices, the text overtly states that there exists a cordial and healthy relationship between the British and the princely state. This is the macrostructure that Van Dijk theorises in the discourse analysis strategies, where all structures in a discourse lead to a central argument.[12] The queen expresses her desire to maintain "everlasting harmony" with the British by upholding the principle of "mutual fondness."[13] The constant reiteration of cordial relations is significant when we trace back the historical relationship between the Travancore Royal Family and the British East India Company. The eighteenth-century Venad (later Travancore) was a period of many adversities for the royal family. The *Pillamar* and *Matampimar*, who were feudal lords, enjoyed positions more powerful than the King, causing many malpractices in society. In 1729, Marthanda Varma entered the scene as the saviour of the state. The constant threats from the neighbouring states led Marthanda Varma to join hands with the East India Company. It was at the request of the King that the East India Company established a military base in Travancore, thereby marking a friendly allegiance.

Amity between the Company and Travancore

During the reign of King Balarama Varma, the Resident in Travancore was replaced by Col. Macaulay, who had a visible hatred for the subjects of the kingdom. Raja wrote a letter to the Governor-General, Marquis of Wellesley, regarding the behaviour of the Resident in 1801. He compares Macaulay to the previous Resident Major Brannerman, and says that:

[11] Ibid.

[12] Teun A. van Dijk, "Macrostructures in Discourse," *Macrostructures: An Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in Discourse, Interaction and Cognition*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1980), 2.

[13] Gowri Parvati Bayi, letter to Colonel McDowell, 1820.

> His character and disposition have proved so directly opposite to those of Major Brannerman (who was ever mindful of the preservation of the rights of me and of my family, and possessed a thorough knowledge of the manners and customs of this country, an observation of which invariably commanded his regard) that the details of particulars would give me the greatest pain and uneasiness… From the day of his arrival here, he has never said anything excepting with asperity and ill humour, and, without touching on matters of business, though the object of his coming here was expressly to advice for the mutual interests of the two States.[14]

This disappointing exchange suggests that the idea of cordiality between the British and Travancore was not always fixed. The relationship between the monarch and the Resident was thus constantly evolving in the context of Travancore.

Colonel Munro Sahib assumed office as Resident in Trivandrum in 1809, marking yet another turn in the history of colonial India. The lost amity between the two states was reestablished during his service. Under Munro, Travancore witnessed two regencies where "the Regent could preside over the temporary arrangements, but could certainly not become a dictator."[15] The accession to power by Gowri Lakshmi Bayi marks the start of a long period of colonial diplomacy between the Resident and the regent. Munro understood that annexation of Travancore was not an option for retaining control over the land. Usually, in other Indian states, Residents were considered as a hindrance to the well-being of the state. However, Colonel Munro was different in his approach, and as a result of his efforts, conditions in Travancore improved considerably, resulting in this being acknowledged in the House of Commons in London.[16] The Rani was responsible for this state of affairs, as she consistently cajoled the Resident and maintained good relations with the Company. She, for her part, went out of her way to win him over, famously

[14] Balarama Varma, "Travancore Raja's Protest Against the Conduct of Resident Major Macaulay," in *Archives Treasury*, ed. J. Rejikumar, (Kerala: Kerala State Archives Department, 2005): 19.

[15] Manu S. Pillai, *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore (*New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2015), 136.

[16] Ibid.

declaring, "to you Colonel, I entrust everything connected with my country."[17] This persuaded Munro to go to the extent of protecting Travancore from the British Raj itself. As the popular story goes, when Gowri Lakshmi Bayi became pregnant in 1813, Munro informed the Company that she had already given birth to a boy and later offered prayers at the Padmanabha Swami temple to make this true. He took this step to protect the state of Travancore from falling into the trap of the Doctrine of Lapse, according to which a ruler who did not have a male heir apparent had to submit the kingdom to the Company. It is also believed that it was Munro who interfered and ensured that Gowri Lakshmi Bayi became Queen when one of her uncles raised objections.[18] Thus, it is evident that the apparent submission of the queen to the Resident or the Company improved the harmony between the two states while also consolidating her personal power.

Another instance that illustrates the reverence of the queen towards the Company appears in a speech delivered by Rani Gowri Parvati Bayi in 1814 while introducing the son of her sister, Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi, as the heir apparent:

> As the respected East India Company are conducting the affairs of the State in a just manner; Sree Padmanabha Swamy is pleased and things are done as the Company desired. As directed by my family deity Sree Padmanabha Swamy, I entrust my dear son to the Company. I consider it the responsibility of the Company to ensure support and respectful conduct towards this Prince in future. What more can I say?[19]

A micro-level reading of this text foregrounds the role of the regent as a maternal figure. In this record, she entrusts her sister's son to the Company in the hope that the Company will help the heir apparent evolve into a good ruler. Using the discourse of the family, the regent attempts to establish a political link between the heir apparent and the Resident, thereby securing the autonomy of the state. The text also reveals an underlying political intention, which is to ensure that the cooperation extended during her reign would

[17] Ibid.

[18] V.S. Sharma, *Travancore Dynasty: A Short History* (Thiruvananthapuram: Mathrubhumi, 2013), 56.

[19] Ibid., 58.

continue in the future as well.

In conclusion, archival documents such as letters and speeches from nineteenth-century colonial India reveal that language functioned as a political strategy. The letter examined in this paper shows that the regent's language was never ceremonial. The regent's language operated as a political tool to maintain the stability of her kingdom. By drawing on the discourse of domesticity and diplomacy, the regent was able to exercise a form of political autonomy. In this sense, the queen's apparent submission to the Resident can be understood as a conscious diplomatic act. Her discourse allowed her to negotiate power without openly challenging colonial authority, while ensuring the protection of the kingdom and its future heir. She positions herself as a maternal figure in need of guidance from a male authority by employing idioms of kinship. A macro-level reading of the gendered language in this archival letter thus serves as a case study for understanding the political strategies of a regent queen. The regent's rhetoric illustrates how women in colonial India navigated power by using domesticity as a diplomatic tool, challenging the political authority from within the very constraints imposed upon them.

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Opium Trade and Smuggling in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century Nepal

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Research on the Nepalese opium trade and its smuggling has been limited, with historians primarily focusing on the production and transportation of either Malwa or Bengal opium. This article examines trade and smuggling activities in and around Nepal's southern Tarai region during the second half of the nineteenth century. These activities were likely facilitated by neighbouring territories through various channels established by petty merchants with strong connections across the Indo-Nepal border. Owing to its porous nature, Nepal became a conduit for smuggling numerous commodities, including opium. The article also explores the conditions of cultivators in this region, whose subsistence relied heavily on opium cultivation, at a time when prices set by the British government were low. Amidst these circumstances, cultivators found ways to smuggle opium through such merchants. Besides opium, the export of timber via rivers also found its way into British territory, where it was used to make opium chests for export to China. In contrast, British agents played a crucial role in controlling this ongoing trade and smuggling. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British government faced setbacks in opium production in the Banaras and Bihar regions, which were partially offset by the importation of Nepalese opium. The import of Nepalese opium into British territory highlights the conditions faced by cultivators, revealing their reliance on opium cultivation and, to some extent, the treacherous game involved in the smuggling of opium outside British territory. The British government's policy regarding Nepalese opium focused on its import and on monitoring its smuggling into areas beyond its control.

Keywords: Nepal, Smuggling, Opium, British rule, Merchant Capitalism

Introduction

After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the English East India Company (EIC) began taking a keen interest in trade to run its mighty empire. The import and export of various commodities played a crucial role. However, the trade in opium worked as fuel for the empire. The EIC was far from manufacturing and monopolising opium; initially, it was mainly done by local traders. Later, a system was established to monopolise and regulate opium cultivation and its trade in India. Governor General Warren Hastings further centralised control over it in 1773, instituting opium agencies across regions like Faizabad, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. The Company implemented a contract system, auctioning opium production rights to the highest bidders or the zamindars, who forced and penalised farmers, but this system failed to meet quotas in 1797. In the same year, the contract system was replaced by the agency system through the Regulation Act VI of 1799, a change which lasted for over a century. This system brought total control over the opium industry. Instead of exporting opium to China, the EIC decided to concentrate on producing it within India itself. Part of the

reason for the success of the opium trade was military. Two wars forced China to open its doors to British-Indian opium. The expansion and durability of the colonial opium trade in India were mostly due to a sizable and well-functioning governmental machinery. The EIC established dominance over opium in the late eighteenth century, which included de facto monopoly control. The state regulated the sale of opium, and all forms of production were carried out for the state's vested interests. To manage and regulate its monopoly, the EIC set up an Opium Department.[1]

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, due to the expansion of British rule over a large part of the subcontinent and Britain's growing dominance in the global money market, India's foreign policy underwent certain structural changes in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.[2] Opium became a major commodity in India's foreign trade. The monopoly of colonial rule over opium carried from Bombay for the same purpose accounted for a sizeable portion of its income. The commodity was brought to China by British traders and swift-moving clippers, where its sale brought in enormous profits despite the fast-growing addiction. In addition to helping India transfer its export excess from the China trade to England's credit in Chinese accounts, opium shipments allowed India to fulfil its financial obligations to England. Launching steamers, boats, ships, clippers, and ferries on river for exporting opium to China was another initiative taken by the British government; it was previously transported via roads. The EIC required these services for a variety of other reasons: to transport newly arrived cadets and officers to their joining stations, to transport exported saltpetre, indigo, textiles, cotton, and other bulk commodities such as grain, and to convey troops.[3]

The British EIC held a monopoly over the manufacture and sale of the Patna and Benares varieties of Bengal opium, and managed its production so well that the Chinese accepted the Company's trademark as a mark of quality for this contraband, as they did for legal goods. Malwa opium, produced in other Indian states, was of lower quality and was first brought in small amounts by the Portuguese through their settlements in Goa and Daimon on India's north-west coast. Turkish opium from Smyrna, which British speculators could not import directly, reached China via American merchants. The Company was concerned about these imports, but Turkish opium was inferior and came from far away. It was mainly mixed with the more

[1] Rolf Bauer, *The Peasant Production of Opium in the Nineteenth-Century India* (Boston: Brill, 2019), 2.

[2] K. N. Chaudhuri, "India's Foreign Trade and the Cessation of the East India Company's Trading Activities, 1828-1840," *The Economic History Review* 19, no. 2 (August 1966): 345-363; Asiya Siddiqui, *Trade and Finance in Colonial India 1750-1860* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1995), 385.

[3] Nitin Sinha, "Contact, Work, and Resistance: Boatmen in Early Colonial Eastern India, 1760s–1850s," *International Review of Social Society* 59, no. 22 (2014): 11-43.

expensive Bengal opium, and by the 1830s, its annual sales remained below 900 chests.[4]

Amar Farooqui, in the context of Malwa opium, which was a non-monopoly opium, focuses on the role of bankers, brokers, and moneylenders, who emulated the role of the EIC and maintained a network for the export of opium, thereby aiding in the overall progress of the system as a whole. Their distribution networks lubricated the mass markets necessary for the establishment of Indian capitalism in western India. These same distribution networks contributed to the development and maintenance of the expansive marketplaces that made it possible for Indian capitalism to flourish in western India.[5] Secondly, unlike Bengal opium, which was under the control of the British government, Farooqui traces how the British attempted to eradicate Malwa opium to control or end the trade. This included pressure to forbid the passage of opium through their territories, which became a threat to Indian revenue.[6] Thirdly, historians like David Edward Owen and Beinoy Bhushan Chaudhuri[7] assumed that the cultivation of Malwa opium was free and therefore lucrative for the peasants. However, Farooqui argues that these Sahukars, Banias, Mahajanas, and *Gomastas*, who took responsibility for making advances to the peasants and gathering up the harvested opium, compelled cultivators to succumb to pressures in terms of crop choice.[8]

John F. Richards, in his article, states that opium is neglected in all-India studies because the British contained peasant production of opium within two relatively small regions in northern and western India. Despite its high value as a narcotic, opium in nineteenth-century India did not occupy large tracts of land. Even in the opium-growing regions, poppy rarely exceeded 2-3 per cent of the total cultivated area. Opium cultivation, despite being regulated under a state monopoly and grown under restricted conditions, held significant economic importance for the peasant economy in the opium-producing regions of the north. Despite the unique circumstances and regulations surrounding opium production, it served as a crucial cash crop that contributed significantly to the economic well-being of peasants in these areas. Richards aims to highlight the dual impact of state-controlled opium cultivation that is constitutive of a) its economic significance for local peasants, and b) its unique regulatory framework under state control. The rise of opium cultivation in Bengal and Bihar was driven by the competition between the Dutch and the British EIC to fulfil

[4] Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800-42* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 108.

[5] Amar Farooqi, *Smuggling as Subversion: Colonialism, Indian Merchants, and the Politics of Opium, 1790-1843* (Oxford and Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal, 1859–1885," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 7, no. 1 (March 1970): 25–60.

[8] Farooqi, *Smuggling as Subversion.*

the demands for opium in South-East Asia. One of the ancillary advantages of the British EIC's conquest of Bengal (completed between 1757 and 1764) lay in the trading company's new power to monopolise the production and sale of Bengal opium. A series of agreements granted the other European trading companies the right to obtain fixed, but continually diminishing, shares in the export crop from the new British territory. Gradually, by means of trial and error, the Bengal Government of the EIC perfected a state-run system whereby it could control the production and sale of opium. Richards offers a significant perspective on the farmers of northern India, examining their role within the framework of Indian capitalism. By focusing on their conditions and contributions, he offers an opportunity to delve deeply into this aspect at the grassroots level. This approach not only highlights the economic dynamics at play but also underscores the pivotal role of farmers in shaping broader socio-economic structures. Understanding their realities can illuminate critical insights related to the interconnectedness of agriculture, capitalism, and local economies.[9]

This article is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the conditions of cultivators in opium cultivation and their livelihood. The second section deals with the smuggling activities of cultivators and their relationship with merchants. The third and final section deals with various routes used by these merchants to export opium across the Indo-Nepal border.

Working Conditions and Livelihood of the Opium Cultivators

Nepal, a landlocked country in South Asia, was a native state on the northern frontier of British India, with a frontier spanning five hundred miles.[10] Jahar Sen cites the accounts of Ralph Fitch, Father Della Penna, and Father Ippolito Desideri to conclude that a vast amount of various goods was traded between India and Tibet via Nepal up to the nineteenth century.[11] Opium was extensively grown for local use by cultivators in the southern Tarai region of Nepal. It was annually brought in large quantities to opium godowns and sold to the British government. The government purchased opium at fixed rates, similar to the prices paid to farmers in British territory who grew opium, under an advance system in which farmers received a loan or advance before

[9] J. F. Richards, "The Opium Industry in British India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 2-3 (2002): 149-180.

[10] From the north-west to the east between 80° and 88° east longitude, the most northern and eastern angle reaches as low as 26°, and its most northern and western corner as high as 30° North latitude. On the east, it is bounded by the state of Sikkim and Darjeeling; on the south, it is bounded by Bengal and the United Provinces; on the west, it is bounded by Kumaon and the River Kali; and on the north, it adjoins Tibet. Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia that borders India to the South. Stretching over 500 miles from the west to the east, the majority of the country is located within Himalayan region.

[11] Jahar Sen, *Indo-Nepal Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd, 1977), 17-18.

cultivation and were required to sell their produce back to the government at predetermined prices.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, opium became a new commodity in Nepal's commercial ties with India, as it became a highly sought-after commodity, primarily for export. Its cultivation began in the eastern and central Tarai regions in the late 1840s and was, most likely, a result of the surge in India's opium shipments to China following the first Opium War (1840–42).[12] A list of Nepalese villages in which opium cultivation was carried out, and the amount of opium brought in by the Nepalese during the last few years of the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century, is provided below.

Table 1: Villages in the Southern Tarai region of Nepal where opium was cultivated.[13]

Pawarwah	Mema	Gambaria
Parsatimpore	Bisrampore	Bhawalia
Pipra	Bageserai	Bhatowra
Pakareah	Basuntpore	Bhatinia
Pasrumpore	Betowna	Jagarnathpore
Parastoka	Bahooarwa	Joimangulpore
Patni	Banjari	Jaswalie
Peeparpanti	Bagahi	Ratunpore
Patowrah	Bariarpore	Ramporara
Piparia	Banjaria	Ramnagari
Tetah	Bahrampore	Rajwalia
Foolwaria	Beldari	Latmari
Foolkawal	Baswareah	Lachumanwa
Foolgawan	Bariaiporetola Bhunisa	Lalchandwa
Bankool	Belahia	Luchimpore
Burwah	Bhugwanpore	Lalkantwa
Bohooari	Bhowra	Itwa
Indurwa	Fechaha	Itiahi
Indurhari	Mananpore	Gahargoma
Aharaila	Majharia	Gahawatolah
Amowah	Majhariatola	Khoerawa
Aoraha	Mookhiapali	Ghioora
Achawnie	Motepore	Dhosaraha

[12] Mahesh C. Regmi, *An Economic History of Nepal, 1846-1901* (Varanasi: Nath Publishing House, 1988), 199-200.

[13] "Memorandum on Opium-Smuggling," by A. V. Knyvett, Esq., District Superintendent of Police, Chumparun, dated 8 September 1881, *Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal,* Revenue Department, Branch: Miscellaneous Revenue, Head No. 1 — Opium (Manufacture and Provisions), Calcutta, July 1891, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA).

Ahar	Mohoowna	Ghoormi
Semarbari	Motihari	Chikani
Santpore	Mohuahi	Charampore
Sisiari	Murli	Chatonowa
Sidhowa	Motiarma	Jhitkahia
Santgunge	Madhuni	Jhahooab
Sekhowna	Kachorawa	Jhakhara
Siripore	Kuhari	Taigraha
Sisurah	Kallanpore	Taita
Sitalpore	Kewoohi	Tera
Soomermia	Kolooa	Dookoila
Houswa	Kalia	Digarwa
Hariharpore	Dhangadhowa	Tooshiahi
Hardia	Dhasamnuggur	Dasowta
Moosaili	Khootwa Pursoni	Narkatia
Maniari	Gadiani	Nagawah
Madhowal	Gardwal	Nagardaho
Moheshpore		

The list provided by Jahar Sen and Upadhyaya differs from the above-mentioned list, which has been derived from colonial records. Because it could be cultivated alongside other crops like maize, millets, and safflower, opium cultivation appears to have been popular among farmers in the areas under scrutiny. The government of Rana Bahadur (1775–1806) imposed a monopoly on exports in an effort to absorb the profits, but this initiative proved infeasible and was subsequently abandoned. Thereafter, cultivators were granted freedom to raise and sell the crop as they pleased. In the early 1880s, Nepali opium producers were urged to deliver their goods directly to British Indian Territory government depots for sale.[14] British sources claimed, "the Nepal cultivators are reported to be well satisfied with the present arrangements, under which the opium is received directly from the Nepalese raiyats and paid for under the conditions which apply to cultivators in British territory."[15] Later, Jung Bahadur (1846-1877) introduced the monopoly system for the first time in the Tarai region. Opium and sugarcane were the primary commodities used for these purposes. However, the accomplishments were far from adequate. In the 1840s, the growing of opium for commercial purposes began in the eastern Tarai districts. Over time, production volume increased to the point where a monopoly on exports could be justified.

[14] Government of India, *Report of the Administration of Bengal, 1880-1881 (*Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1882), WBSA.

[15] Government of India, *Report of the Administration of Bengal, 1893-94* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895), cited in Mahesh C. Regmi's, *An Economic History of Nepal, 1846-1901*, (1988), 200.

Smuggling of Opium

Smuggling, as a term, refers to the act of exporting a commodity without paying taxes to the government. In the second half of the nineteenth century, opium was one of the many commodities that were smuggled via different channels by local traders. Local farmers from the Tarai region of Nepal used to cultivate opium in collaboration with village chiefs and the representatives of their receivers in Calcutta and Chandernagore. For the same reason, smugglers from Assam and Punjab migrated to the Tarai region. The main locations where the smugglers deposited the opium, on their way to Calcutta and Chandernagore before sending it to overseas ports, were Baidyanath and a location in the Tarai region close to the Gorakhpur frontier.[16]

Brian Houghton Hodgson, the Assistant Resident in Nepal, prepared a report titled *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal Vol. XXVII*, which advocated the recruitment of a large number of Nepalese in the British Army; for this purpose, trade relations with Nepal were mandatory. The data collected by Hodgson included the commercial route to Kathmandu, marts of the Tibetan frontier and other centres of Central Asian trade, the manner and expense of conveying goods, the amount and nature of the duties levied thereon by the Nepal Government and the places where they were levied, the length of each stage in the route, the estimated purchasing price in Calcutta of numerous articles of Central Asian trade, their selling price in Nepal, the total import of each into Nepal, and total consumption within Nepalese territory.[17] In 1816, after the establishment of the residency at Kathmandu, the Government of India had to bear all the expenses of the establishment. By 1829, the expenditure could be covered by the gains of trade.[18] The British resident, in collaboration with the Nepal administration, encouraged the native merchants of Benares to establish not less than ten *kothis* (factories) at Kathmandu. In the third decade of the nineteenth century, attempts were made to systematise Indo-Nepalese commercial relations within the framework of a treaty.[19]

In a letter to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Home Department, A. Mackenzie, Secretary to the Government of Bengal in the Judicial Department, declared that if any farmers were found guilty of being involved in opium smuggling, their licences to cultivate poppy would be cancelled and might not be granted again. To facilitate this identification, an order was issued by the Lieutenant Governor to transfer to the jails of their own districts all persons, residents of districts in Bihar, who could be apprehended and convicted of opium smuggling in other districts. But, in

[16] Jahar Sen, *Essays in Indo-Nepal Trade: A Nineteenth-Century Study* (Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi & Company, 1991), 56-57.

[17] B. H. Hodgson, *Essays on the Languages, Literature and Religion of Nepal and Tibet* (London: Trübner, 1874).

[18] Sen, *Indo-Nepal Trade*, 27-29.

[19] Ibid., 33.

case a smuggler convicted in Bengal involved a native of Benares in the North-Western Provinces, he could not be transferred to his native district in the absence of sanction from the Government of India under Section 32 of Act V of 1872.[20] Yet, the transfer of the prisoners convicted of opium smuggling in other districts to the jails of their own districts could not be generally accorded; although, in one particular case of a smuggler who was the native of Benares but was convicted in Bengal, the government of Bengal authorised his transfer to the Benares Jail under the provision of Section 32 of Act V of 1872.[21]

Besides railway stations and inland and overland trade routes, there were several other channels of smuggling. The post office was another major development. In a report, a post office situated in Bihar was found to contain a suspicious parcel filled with opium. The postmaster quickly gave notice to the police under section 369 of the *Code of Criminal Procedure*.[22] Opium was also brought through dense forests from Nepal and smuggled through Meerut, Saharanpur, and Gorakhpur on its way to the princely states of Punjab and beyond.[23]

The smuggling of opium spread rapidly, and it became absolutely necessary for the government to implement strict regulations to prevent it by imposing rigorous penalties and even imprisonment. A report from John Edgar, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to all District Magistrates and Deputy Commissioners, referred to two fresh cases of opium smuggling. In the first case, an accused who was found in possession of 12 maunds of opium, was convicted and sentenced by the Sub-Divisional Officer who tried the case to six months of rigorous imprisonment. However, upon appeal by the Magistrate of the district, the sentence was reduced to three months of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 100, or, in default, two more months of rigorous imprisonment. In the other case, the opium that was smuggled amounted to 2½ maunds, and seven persons were implicated in this case, of whom six were allowed to turn Queen's evidence, meaning they consented to testify in favour of the prosecution in exchange for leniency. This allowed the authorities to strengthen their case against the remaining suspects. The punishment inflicted on the convicted person was four months' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 400, or,

[20] *Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal,* Judicial Department, Branch: Jail, File No. 3187, Proceedings 46, August 1872, WBSA.

[21] *Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal,* Judicial Department, Branch: Jail-A, Nos. 187–188, August 1872, WBSA.

[22] *Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal,* Judicial Department, Branch: Police, File No. 463A, Proceedings 12, 139–140, October 1881, WBSA.

[23] *Report on the Administration of the Opium Department, 1889–90,* "Revenue Department (1890), Miscellaneous Revenue, No. 55N, Camp Benares, 3 December 1890. From J. H. Rivett-Carnac, Esq., C.S., C.I.E., Opium Agent, Benares, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, L.P. — Annual Report on the Operations of the Benares Opium Agency, 1889–90," National Archives of India (NAI); cited in Anirudh Deshpande, "An Historical Overview of Opium Cultivation and Changing State Attitudes towards the Crop in India, 178–2000 A.D.," *Studies in History* 25, no. 1 (2009): 109–143, at 117.

in default, a further period of three months' rigorous imprisonment. The Government of India was concerned that the penalties imposed in some cases of fraud were far too low compared to the potential loss to public revenue, and that many of the accused were allowed to turn Queen's evidence. It stressed that the future conduct of such cases should properly reflect the seriousness and scale of the fraud attempted.[24]

Smuggling was also being carried out from the Tarai region of Nepal, as described by Jahar Sen. However, he mentions some cases of smuggling that leave us with a hazy picture. I have traced some more cases of smuggling in which the people were caught red-handed at railway stations while carrying opium with them, for local consumption in Punjab.[25] This led to a disruption in the delivery of the smuggled consignment. Those who were involved in opium smuggling belonged to a variety of castes, namely Bania, *Taeli, Arthi* and Fakir. They used to procure opium from shopkeepers in Nepal. However, the inability to deliver opium to godowns was further compounded by personal issues that individuals might have been dealing with. One case that sheds light on it is that of a farmer named Shiv Charan Sahu, a poppy cultivator of the village Parsauni in the Nepal Territory, at a distance of 33 miles from the British outpost of Segowli, who was found guilty of carrying 7 ½ *Chattacks*[26] of opium, and was caught by the railway head constable Danesh Ally. The opium found in his possession was the produce of his field, which he was unable to deliver at the government godowns at Motihari on account of illness. Not knowing what to do with the opium which remained with him, he was advised by a person from Parsauni village, whose name he declined to reveal, to take it down to Motihari; but, finding that the weighment was over, he came to Mahameh with the intention of taking the opium for sale to Calcutta. But on his arrival, he was arrested and set up for trial. Shiv Charan Sahoo was convicted on 11 September by the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Barh with either six months' jail imprisonment and a fine of fifty rupees, or nine-months' Jail. Anirudh Deshpande states that the colonial state's anti-smuggling campaign was complicated by the fact that its allies often harassed honest poppy growers.[27]

Before monetisation, the opium trade was conducted by the exchange of commodities on a money valuation on the frontier of Awadh.[28] The Nepalese *mohar* was preferred in all important markets in comparison to the Indian rupee. Currency notes were not

[24] *Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal,* Judicial Department, Branch: Judicial, File No. 586, Proceedings, 1 July 1889, WBSA.

[25] For the list of villages where opium was cultivated, refer to Table-1.

[26] 1 *chattak/chatak* is equal to 4 *tolas.* 1 *seer* is equal to 16 chataks whereas, 40 *seers* is equal to 1 maund. See unit of measurement in Rolf Bauer, *The Peasant Production of Opium in Nineteenth-Century India* (Boston: Brill, 2019), xv.

[27] Anirudh Deshpande, "An Historical Overview of Opium Cultivation and Changing State Attitudes towards the Crop in India, 1878-2000 A.D.," Studies *in History* 25, no. 1 (2009): 109-143.

[28] Sen, *Indo-Nepal Trade*, 97.

used in transactions between the Nepalese and Indian traders.[29] Nepali coins were equivalent to Indian rupees. Kirkpatrick gives a description of the silver, gold and copper currency, which was minted in Kathmandu.[30]

Opium Trafficking Routes Across the Indo-Nepal border

Calcutta served as the main port of the British EIC. It was well connected to different production sites through a wide network of rivers, which made the export of goods easier and more productive. The Ganges, which was navigable throughout the year, was the main river highway across the vast Gangetic plains. The British found the Gangetic river suitable as a channel for trade primarily because of its natural connection to all the major rivers and streams in the agricultural plains of northern and southern Bihar. These rivers were used to ship large quantities of saltpetre, opium, and grain to the port of Calcutta. The rivers were expected to serve as primary highways after the British ruled the region, and the pre-modern roads along the Ganges lost their importance as the focal point shifted from Calcutta to Delhi. However, during the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, the colonial government invested considerable funds in building and maintaining a system of roads in the inland areas.

Before the advent of railways and their later expansion across India, people depended on roads, which were often in bad condition. Jahar Sen gives a description of roads heading from various districts of the North-Western Provinces to Nepal, which were partially fit for foot passengers, carts, pack ponies, and pack bullocks, which were a common means of transport and carried considerable amounts of trade.[31] In 1875, Mr H. G. Wilkins, District Superintendent of Police, found that the opium smuggling was carried on by some smugglers.[32] These smugglers had godowns at Parsauni and Hetowni in Nepal, at Govindganj and Bettiah in the district, and also at Patna, Calcutta, Benares, Kanpur, Rajmahal, and Delhi. The smuggling was supposed to be carried out almost entirely in the direction of Chandernagore and along the main routes that passed through Purnea and Bhagalpur. Merchandise within the district was transported by river to Govindganj, from where it was then taken by river to

[29] "Revenue A, August 1877, No. 16. The Deputy Commissioner, Gonda, to the Commissioner, Fyzabad Division, No. 964, dated 15 April 1876," cited in Jahar Sen, *Indo-Nepal Trade* (1977), 100.

[30] William Kirkpatrick, *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul: Being the Substance of Observations Made During a Mission to that Country in the Year 1793* (London: William Miller, 1811), 216-219.

[31] Sen, *Indo-Nepal Trade*, 49-54.

[32] The names of the smugglers with their castes were: Chutoo Singh, Bunniah; Padaruth Sonar, Kalianpore; Doma Sha, Nakatwa; Chatoo Kandoo, Jai Maohto Dhanook; and brothers Harat Narain, Ram Narain, and Khoobari Narain.

Patna and then by sea to Chandernagore. It seems that, if not actively encouraged, this trade must have been at least connived at by the Nepalese officials themselves.[33]
Opium was smuggled not just in Behar and the north-western regions but even into the Punjab region. Smuggling from the Tarai region of Nepal into the Punjab region was primarily carried out by smugglers using carts via a jungle path that passed through Butwal and into Gorakhpur. Notably, Punjabis were granted passes for opium trading by the Punjab Government as late as 1876 and 1877. These individuals often approached the Champaran Magistrate for a similar pass to protect them while travelling through these provinces, and they were understandably shocked to find that Bengal had different regulations on the matter. Due to the closure of the direct route through Champaran, they only needed to transport the opium into Gorakhpur in order to avoid being arrested. As a result, the jungle route via the Bhikhna Thori pass and Butwal into Gorakhpur was used freely and safely, and Punjabis exported large amounts of opium from the Terai and transported it to Punjab via the North-Western Provinces.

In 1879-80, to curb the opium trade, the Punjab Government issued no more passes, and the carriage of opium through the North-Western Provinces became fraught with the same risks as in Bengal. As a result, the longer and more difficult route through Bootwal was abandoned, and the illicit traders in opium were driven to the more direct route through this district. Later, it was found that the post offices were used as a means of carrying the drug to the Punjab region; for instance, a small wooden box, wrapped in cloth and sealed as though for delivery by post, was seized by the Raxaul police and, on being opened, was found to contain three *sers* of opium. The parcel was addressed to Rajah (an assumed name) of Ambala. As a result, the police started to keep a watch on the post offices.[34]

Another mode of opium smuggling was through various railway stations. The significance of railroads as commercial conduits was acknowledged in the 1870s. In order to promote and ease trade relations with Nepal, branch lines from the existing railways were frequently constructed to advantageous locations along the border.

Numerous records reveal that smuggling was carried out by several Punjabi farmers or, possibly, by the smugglers themselves. In a letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal from James Monro Esq., who was Inspector-General of Police in the Lower Provinces, it was reported that several Punjabi farmers were caught and

[33] "Memorandum on Opium-Smuggling," by A. V. Knyvett, Esq., District Superintendent of Police, Chumparun, dated 8 September 1881, *Proceedings of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Revenue Department*, Branch: Miscellaneous Revenue, Head No. 2, Opium (Manufacture and Provision), Calcutta, August 1881, WBSA.

[34] Ibid., 98.

arrested for smuggling opium from the Bihiya railway station.[35] The consignment was packed very carefully in wooden boxes, covered with canvas, sealed, and addressed like an ordinary parcel. After weighing, it was found that the parcel contained almost 280 *tollah* of opium.[36] Later, it was decided that the police of the districts bordering on the Terai region, viz., Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Munger, Bhagalpur and Purnea, should be provided with facilities for obtaining information from the postal authorities regarding suspicious parcels addressed to Amritsar, Patiala, Ambala, and other places in Punjab. On 15 February 1880, a sub-inspector of Adapur found that a large group of Punjabis was carrying opium. They left Parsauni en route to the Bihar railway station. The inspector telegraphed this information to the assistant Inspector-General of railway police and the district Superintendent of Shahbad, and seven Punjabis, with about 3 maunds of opium, were arrested. The sub-inspector, Mahomed Ariff, and his informer received rewards of Rs. 107-10 each.[37]

On 14 May 1881, the Shahbad railway police and the District Superintendent of Police again intercepted two Punjabis who were travelling with six pack-bullocks to Koelwar railway station. These Punjabis stated that they were going to Koelwar, but were arrested at Mughalsarai on 20 May 1881, and fined Rs. 50 each.[38] On 18 June 1881, the sub-inspector of Gobindganj arrested five Punjabis with three and a half maunds of opium and found that a second party had gone via Gorakhpur towards Mylapore on the Oudh and Rohilkhand Railway. The sub-inspector telegraphed the information to the railway police and to the District Superintendents of Banares and Faizabad and later learned that the four *Cabulis*[39] mentioned in his telegrams were arrested in Lucknow.[40] Lastly, on 2 August 1881, he informed the railway police and District Superintendents of several districts through which the railway ran that further arrangements were now being made to smuggle twelve maunds of opium by rail. The movement of trains was being carefully monitored, and there was reason to believe that boats would be used, as every recent attempt to place opium on the railways had failed, as a result of the arrest of smugglers and the seizure and confiscation of opium.[41] In this whole process, it was important to note that the opium in all cases came from one 'Doma Sha' of Parsauni, who, according to the more recent information at hand, nearly monopolised the trade. Some smugglers were finally arrested in

[35] The names of the farmers were: Punjab Singh, Authun Singh, Andan Singh, Munraj Singh, Medaun Singh, and Bhagwan Singh.

[36] "Letter no. 8096, Fort William, 8 June, 1881, Nepal Residency Records, file no. 13-G, part-II," NAI, New Delhi.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] An anglicised version of *Kabulis,* who were the residents of Kabul, Afghanistan.

[40] "Letter no. 8096, Nepal Residency Records, file no. 13-G, part-II," NAI.

[41] Ibid.

Bengal with small quantities of opium, and were subsequently sent to Motihari jail.[42] It was informed that they were sent out by Doma Sha; however, there were others who had large quantities of opium in their godowns.[43]

Conclusion

In the greater part of the nineteenth century, opium occupied a central place in the global economy. Opium, a cash crop cultivated by farmers in different regions of India, was exported by the EIC to China and smuggled by local traders who had established a decent circuit across the Indo-Nepal border. The use of illegal opium was prevalent in most districts of Nepal, and violations of opium laws were common. We see that despite the EIC's monopoly over the manufacture and export of opium, and after 1858, under British rule, smuggling continued to be done by various traders belonging to various castes. After the construction of railways and post offices, it became easier for smugglers to export opium by using these channels as well. The British government tried every means to arrest the smugglers, and rewards were given to officers and informers. However, they were not entirely successful in containing it, and smuggling continued.

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[42] Ibid. The name of the smugglers with their villages name were: 1. Beekoo Kandoo from Nakatwa, 2. Seetahal Singh of Tenowa, 3. Gokhool Kandoo of Bunkatwa, 4. Rewal Kandoo of Pursowni, 5. Ram Dhani Kandoo of Tenowa, and 6. Ramdeehni Kandoo of Nakatwa.

[43] Ibid. Names are mentioned who had opium godowns, all belonging to the same caste: Sengolam Bhagat Teli and Moti Bhagut Teli from Nakatwa and Pursowni, Luchooman Teli from Pareyniya, and Fukeera Sah Teli from Pheyta.

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‘Aryan’ Rama and ‘Dravidian’ Ravana: Emergence of the *Ramayana* Criticism in the Self-Respect Movement

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This paper explores the emergence of the Ramayana criticism within Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s. While existing scholarship has emphasised Periyar’s antagonism towards the epic, it often treats his critique as static and focuses narrowly on a few selected texts. By examining Periyar’s early life experiences, the influence of anti-caste thinkers like Phule, the neo-Shaivite reinterpretations of the Ramayana, and his complex relationship with Gandhi, this study argues that Periyar’s engagement with the epic was historically contingent and politically evolving. It shows how this epic, widely reread in Tamil society as a tale of Aryan domination and Brahminical oppression, became central to the ideological battles of the Self-Respect Movement. The paper highlights three key factors shaping the Ramayana discourse: Periyar’s iconoclastic childhood questioning of religious authority, the diffusion of Aryan invasion theory through non-Brahmin intellectual circles, and the shift in his attitude towards Gandhi from reverence to confrontation. By situating the Ramayana polemics within these contexts, the study demonstrates how Periyar and his movement transformed the epic into a site of resistance, one that linked social reform, anti-caste struggle, and Dravidian identity.

Keywords: Dravidian Movement, Gandhi, Ramayana

Introduction

At the annual celebration of the Tamil magazine *Tughlaq* on 14 January 2020, actor Rajinikanth honoured the magazine’s legacy by recounting how it had bravely exposed the “horrors” of the Superstition Eradication Conference held at Salem in 1971, organised by Periyar and his Dravidar Kazhagam. According to Rajinikanth, images of Rama and Sita were displayed without clothes and garlanded with chappals during the conference procession and this incident, he claimed, was reported only by *Tughlaq*. Senior leaders of the DK immediately clarified that while Rama’s statue had indeed been garlanded with footwear and burnt at the end of the procession, neither his nor Sita’s

images were displayed naked.[1] Though Rajinikanth's speech became a state-level sensation for the next few days, it was certainly not the first time in which Periyar's antagonism towards Rama was revealed publicly. Not only did Periyar's ardent critics, like *Tughlaq*, frequently refer to his attacks on Rama and the Ramayana, but his followers also mentioned them with a sense of pride on every possible occasion.[2] In 2016, an organisation called the Thanthai Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam (TPDK) announced that it would burn effigies of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in Chennai as a protest against the celebration of *Ram Lila* in northern India. Although the organisers were arrested before the event could take place,[3] the announcement and preparations for a "Raavana Lila" itself served as a proof of the continuation of a tradition that Periyar had initiated.

Periyar, whose original name was E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, was born in 1879 to non-Brahmin parents of the Balija Naidu community in a small town in western Tamil Nadu called Erode. Though not formally educated, Periyar inherited his father's business and established himself as a successful merchant in the local wholesale market. He began his political career at the age of forty as the Municipal Chairman of Erode and soon became associated with the Madras Presidency Association, which had been started by the Congress to represent the interests of non-Brahmins and counter the influence of the Justice Party. He officially became a member of the Congress during the upsurge of the Non-Cooperation Movement and was soon elected president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. Despite his popularity and stature, Periyar left the Congress in 1926 following the Gurukulam Controversy and the Kanchipuram Congress Conference, as both incidents convinced him that

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[1] Ilangovan Rajasekaran, "Flawed Script: Rajinikanth's Comments on Periyar's 1971 Rally," *Frontline*, February 14, 2020, accessed on August 21, 2022, https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article30682576.ece.

[2] For present-day articulations of Ramayana hermeneutics among Periyarists, see Senthalai Gowthaman, "Iramayanathai yen Periyar edhirthaar?" October 16, 2021, YouTube video, 39:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1TCzPFVt04&t=624s and Thozhar Manjai Vasanthan, "Raman kudhiraikku piranthavan…! Itho aatharam," January 24, 2020, YouTube video, 25:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_CbgRlRUio.

[3] Sanjeev Kumar, "Periyar Was the Initiator of Ravan Leela in Tamil Nadu," *Forward Press*, October 25, 2018, accessed on August 21, 2022, https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/10/periyar-was-the-initiator-of-ravan-leela-in-tamil-nadu/.

Brahmin dominance within the party could not be challenged.[4] Immediately afterwards, he launched the Self-Respect Movement, which was more concerned with social reform than electoral politics. In 1938, he was elected president of the Justice Party, which he later integrated with his Self-Respect Movement, renaming it the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in 1944. However, in 1949, C. N. Annadurai broke away from the DK, taking a large number of its cadres with him to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which then went on to emerge as the ruling party of Tamil Nadu after its resounding victory in the 1967 elections. Despite this split, Periyar remained politically active and continued to influence the state's politics until his death in 1973. Throughout his long public career, he launched several campaigns, including protests against Brahminical Hinduism and the caste system, advocacy of women's rights, the anti-Hindi agitation, the demand for a separate Dravidian nation, and the promotion of atheism and rationalism.

In all these campaigns, Periyar persistently invoked and attacked the Ramayana, which he understood as an epic that celebrated northern imperialism over the South and Brahminical oppression of the Shudras. According to his reading, Rama was not a divine being but a mortal Aryan invader driven by lust for power and domination, while Ravana was portrayed as an egalitarian and courageous monarch of the Dravidian land. Therefore, unlike the Indian nationalists who imagined "Ramarajya" as a synonym for utopia, Periyar saw it as a dystopia in which women, Shudras,

[4] A residential school called *Gurukulam* was established in Cheramandevi town of Tirunelveli district to promote nationalist education and it received funding from the Tamil Nadu Congress. In 1925, Periyar learnt that the Brahmin and non-Brahmin students were made to dine separately in *Gurukulam*, and started a campaign with other non-Brahmin Congressmen like Varadharajulu Naidu to stop this practice. For more on Gurukulam controversy, see Pazha Athiyaman, *Ceeramaateevi Kurukula Poratamum Dravida Iyakkathin Ezhuchiyum* (Nagarcoil: Kalachuvadu Publications, 2014).

On November 21, 1925, Tamil Nadu Congress Committee met at Kanchipuram to discuss and decide about council entry. Periyar participated in this conference mainly to get a mandate from the committee on the question of communal representation, which he had been raising since 1925. At the Kanchipuram conference he proposed that there should be a representation in Legislative Council and other bodies proportionate to the population strength of Brahmins, non-Brahmins and Depressed-Classes. But his resolution was ruled out. For more on the Kanchipuram Conference issue, see Dr. E.Sa. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker* (Madras: Ravi & Vasanth Publishers, 1983), 55-62.

and southern India would be oppressed and subjugated.[5] Apart from critiquing the Ramayana through print and oratory on numerous occasions, Periyar also launched a separate campaign in 1956 calling for the public burning of Rama's images.[6]

Since the Ramayana discourse was intrinsic to Periyar's life and his movements, every scholarship on Periyar and the Dravidian Movement must engage with it. While historians such as Irschick,[7] Pandian,[8] Venkatachalapathy,[9] Geetha and Rajadurai[10] have highlighted Periyar's approach to the Ramayana only in passing, articles by Richman[11] and Ram Manoharan[12] deal with the subject more directly. Though these works clearly delineate certain perspectives of Periyar on the epic and attempt to contextualise and interpret them through different frameworks, they suffer from two major limitations. Firstly, they tend to assume Periyar's criticism of the Ramayana as a static and non-evolving entity. Despite the fact that Periyar consistently spoke and wrote about this particular epic in detail throughout his life, only certain texts authored by him—such as *Iramayana Pattirangal* (The Ramayana Characters), *Iramayana Kurippukal* (Notes on the Ramayana), and *Valmiki Ramayana Sambashani* (A Dialogue on the Valmiki Ramayana)—have been taken into consideration for analysis. Secondly, scholars have

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[5] A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "Periyar E.V. Ram asamy," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 28 February 2020), https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-340 (accessed on 23 August, 2022).

[6] Paula Richman, "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana," Public Culture 7, no.3 (Spring 1995): 641.

[7] Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India the Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[8] M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016).

[9] A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "Dravidian Movement and Saivites: 1927-1944," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 30, No. 14 (April 8, 1995).

[10] V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samaya, 1998).

[11] Paula Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas*: *The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Paula Richman, "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana," *Public Culture* Issue 7, no.3 (1995).

[12] Karthick Ram Manoharan, *Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2022).

predominantly focused on Periyar's own approach while overlooking the range of other interesting interpretations of the Ramayana formulated by cadres of the Self-Respect Movement and the DK. Only Buchholz has studied C. N. Annadurai's take on the Ramayana, and that monograph emphasises the necessity of studying diverse voices and perspectives on the epic within Periyar's movement.[13]

Despite the growing scholarship on Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, a comprehensive historical study examining the emergence, deployment, and evolution of Ramayana criticism within the movement remains absent. This paper, therefore, focuses on a more specific inquiry: what historical circumstances and factors prompted the Ramayana discourse to surface prominently within the Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s? To address this question, the study identifies and analyses three key factors that contributed to the discourse's sudden prominence: Periyar's formative experiences as an iconoclast, the diffusion of the Aryan invasion theory among non-Brahmin groups, and, most critically, the dynamics of his political engagement with Mahatma Gandhi, which precipitated a public confrontation with the epic's central figure, Rama. By tracing these factors, the paper aims to illuminate not only the historical origins of Ramayana criticism in the movement but also its broader significance within the politics of early 20th-century Tamil society.

Archive of this study

A. R. Venkatachalapathy observes that virtually no record of Periyar's ideas prior to 1925 survives which makes it difficult to trace the intellectual roots of his radicalism.[14] To overcome this limitation, I draw upon a combination of biographical, autobiographical, and textual sources that allow us to reconstruct Periyar's early engagements with the Ramayana and related questions of caste and religion. Periyar's first biography, written by Sami Chidambaranar in 1939, provides invaluable insights into his formative years. As an active participant in the Self-Respect Movement, Chidambaranar was able to collect information directly from Periyar's family, offering perspectives

[13] Jonas Buchholz, "Countering Kampaṉ: C.N. Annadurai's Critique of the Rāmāyaṇa" *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasienstudien* 32/33 (2015/2016).

[14] Venkatachalapathy, "Periyar E.V. Ramasamy."

that are otherwise absent in the archive. Supplementing this is Periyar's own incomplete memoir, which, though fragmentary, gives important glimpses into his youth and the evolution of his iconoclastic outlook.

Equally significant is *Kudi Arasu*, the weekly magazine founded by Periyar in May 1925 and published until November 1949. More than a personal mouthpiece, *Kudi Arasu* functioned as a collective forum, recording Periyar's editorials alongside microscopic details of his political activities and contributions from Self-Respecters and ideological allies. For the purposes of this study, I have undertaken a close reading of issues from 1925 to 1927, a period crucial for tracing the first articulations of Ramayana criticism. Finally, I situate these writings alongside earlier Tamil intellectual interventions in the Ramayana debate, such as P. Sundaram Pillai's *Iramayana Ullurai Porulum Thenninthaiya Saathi Varalarum*[15] (Allegorical Meaning of the Ramayana and History of Caste in South India), published in 1907, and A. Perumal Pillai's *Aathi Dravidar Varalaaru*[16] (History of Adi Dravidians History of Adi Dravidians), published in 1922. These texts not only provide a pre-history to Periyar's engagement but also reveal how the Ramayana had already become a contested site through which questions of caste, race, and Dravidian identity were being negotiated.

Periyar's early life and questioning the *Ramayana*

Childhood and early life experiences often play a crucial role in shaping an individual's outlook, which is why biographers frequently trace and narrate the formative years of eminent personalities. In his spiritual biography of Gandhi, Arvind Sharma speculates that Gandhi's later positions—particularly on Hindu-Muslim relations—may have roots in the ideals of the Pranami sect, to which his mother belonged. Founded in the seventeenth century by Prannath, the Pranami sect emphasised inter-dining between Hindus and Muslims and the reading of sacred texts from both religions during communal

[15] Manonmaniam Sundaram Pillai, Ramaayana Ullurai Porulum Thenindiya Saathi Varalarum (Trichy: Adiyalam publication, 2018).

[16] Gowthama Sanna, ed., *Aadthi Thiraavidar Varalaaru* (Chennai: Aazhi Publishers, 2019).

gatherings.[17] Similarly, Gandhi's own writings reveal the lasting impact of stories about Shravana Kumar and King Harishchandra, which he encountered in childhood. Childhood episodes can also serve as profoundly transformative experiences. Ambedkar, for instance, recounts that at the age of nine, a harrowing encounter with untouchability during a journey to Koregaon left an "indelible impression" on his mind.[18] As a member of the untouchable Mahar caste, he and his siblings initially struggled to secure a bullock-cart at Masur railway station; only after paying double fare and agreeing to ride the cart themselves did a driver lend it, walking alongside to avoid "pollution" from their touch. Though Ambedkar had previously faced discrimination in his village, this incident struck him with unprecedented force, compelling him to reflect seriously on the social reality of untouchability.[19] In a similar vein, the roots of Periyar's later critique of the Ramayana can be traced to his early life, well before he became involved in politics or social reform.

Periyar's father, Venkata Naicker, was a staunch and pious Vaishnavite who devoted considerable wealth and time to religious activities.[20] The first two children of Naicker and his wife, Muthammal, died at a young age, prompting the couple to immerse themselves in prayers and rituals such as fasting and listening to the recitation of the Ramayana and the *Bhagavata Purana*.[21] When Periyar was born, he was named after Lord Rama, the very deity he would later challenge and critique throughout his life. During his childhood, Periyar's house was regularly visited by ascetics, Vaishnavite devotees, and Bhagavatas seeking donations and gifts from his father. Elder Naicker generously contributed to temple activities and the feeding of Brahmins, and Periyar observed that his parents imitated and behaved almost like orthodox Brahmins.[22]

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[17] Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 18, Kindle.

[18] Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol. 12* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 670.

[19] Ibid, 665- 671.

[20] Sami Chidambaranar, *Sami Chidambaranar Nool Kalanjiyan 2: Tamilar Talaivar (Periyar E. V. R. Varalaaru)* (Chennai: Tamilman pathipakam, 2013), 19.

[21] Ibid., 21.

[22] Ibid., 27.

Unlike his elder brother, E. V. Krishnasamy Naicker, who obediently followed religious practices, Periyar was a rebellious youth.[23] He transgressed caste boundaries, freely interacting with children and elders from lower castes, and even ate food prepared in their homes. He constantly debated with the sannyasis and Brahmins who visited his father's home and workplace, often embarrassing them with satirical questions about gods, fate, the puranas, and religion.[24] When he married Nagammai at the age of nineteen in 1898, he insisted that she cook non-vegetarian meals for him—an act considered taboo by other family members. On one occasion, he even tricked her into removing her thali/*mangalsutra*, a symbol that a married woman cannot remove until her husband's death. Because of such an "unclean" lifestyle, his mother sometimes avoided touching him.[25]

At the age of 25, following the death of his five-month-old daughter and a quarrel with his father over a minor issue, Periyar resolved to abandon householder life and become an ascetic in Varanasi. There, he gained firsthand knowledge of caste injustices and witnessed the exploitation of illiterate masses by Brahmin priests in the name of religion. During his journey to the holy city, Periyar was accompanied by two Tamil Brahmins—Venkatramana Iyer and Ganapathy Iyer. To raise funds for their travel, the three temporarily stayed in the Andhra region, publicly singing verses from the Ramayana and other Puranas while collecting donations.[26] While the Brahmins recited the verses in Sanskrit, Periyar translated them into Telugu, adding his own commentary, which was filled with humorous criticisms and satirical comments.[27] This episode provides the first direct evidence of Periyar's engagement with the Ramayana, although the exact content and nature of his rhetoric remain unknown.

Through a Freudian framework, Ram Manoharan argues that Periyar had an antagonistic relationship with figures of parental authority from his childhood—be it his father, teachers, or priests.[28] This reading is largely

[23] Ibid., 31.
[24] Ibid., 29.
[25] Ibid., 35-36.
[26] Sami Chidambaranar, *Sami Chidambaranar Nool Kalanjiyan 2*, 45.
[27] Ibid., 46.
[28] Ram Manoharan, *Periyar*, 5.

persuasive, as Periyar may indeed have felt suffocated living in a devout Hindu household. Later in his life, he referred to his father as a "Brahmin loyalist" and proudly implied that he was free from his father's influence.[29] While this interpretation helps explain his rebellious disposition, it raises another question: from where did he derive the inspiration to satirically debate and critique the Ramayana? Although we cannot locate his exact source of inspiration, his biographies and autobiographical writings suggest that it was not political in nature. Rather, Periyar likely posed commonsensical questions in a humorous manner—questions that would naturally occur to anyone familiar with the basic storyline of the Ramayana.

Richman notes that certain actions of Rama—such as the banishment of Sita to the forest, the mutilation of Surpanakha, and the shooting of Vaali from behind—appear to deviate from dharma. While some devotees reconcile themselves with these ambiguities, others openly express their doubts.[30] Oral narratives and folk performances of the Ramayana across India often reflect such dilemmas within the epic. I propose that Periyar's early rhetoric against the Ramayana similarly stemmed from doubts and dilemmas that arise in the common person's mind. Much like audiences of folk performances, who enjoyed satirical and irreverent commentary on divine beings, people who gathered around Periyar in marketplaces and streets listened to his mockery of the Ramayana and other Puranas with curiosity and amusement, rather than anger. This formative experience indeed prepared E. V. Ramasamy for the decisive critique he launched against Vishnu's avatar, 'Ramaswami', a few years later.

Reading myths through Aryan invasion theory

Although Periyar had been ridiculing the Ramayana from his youth, we cannot say that his rhetoric at that time had any political purpose or ambition. It was only in 1922, at the 30th Tamil Nadu Congress Committee Conference held in Tiruppur, that Periyar made his first political comment on the

[29] Ibid.

[30] Paula Richman ed., *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 6.

Ramayana.[31] When asked about the means of annihilating caste, he replied, "If caste ought to be destroyed, then the gods who protect the caste system should cease to exist. If the Ramayana ensures the preservation of caste, then it should be burnt."[32] Periyar could make such a daring and outrageous statement at a Congress conference cannot be explained solely because of the irreverent attitude he had developed towards the Ramayana in his early life. Rather, he was able to make this claim at Tiruppur because, by that time, the Ramayana had already become an arena of cultural conflict between Brahmins and South Indian non-Brahmins, drawing inspiration from the Aryan invasion theory.

The invention of the Aryan race in nineteenth-century Europe became foundational to the interpretation of early Indian history during the colonial era.[33] Some Orientalists proposed that the original homeland of the culturally elevated and superior Aryans lay in Central Asia. Over time, they branched off in two directions—one toward Europe and the other toward Iran and later India. The Aryans who migrated to India were fair-complexioned and, according to this theory, conquered the dark-skinned indigenous population called the *dasas*, who were not only different from the newcomers but also considered inferior. The Aryans, who developed Vedic Sanskrit as their language, are said to have invented the institution of caste to segregate and protect themselves from the "barbaric" non-Aryans. In modern interpretations, the Aryans are often identified with Brahmins, while the lower castes, untouchables, and tribes constitute the pre-Aryan indigenous population.[34]

This theory was readily employed by upper-caste Indian scholars, social reformers, and later nationalists to claim descent from the "glorious" Aryans, who civilised the subcontinent by founding Hindu religion—a civilisation purportedly in decline following Muslim invasions.[35] Conversely, the Aryan invasion theory was radically used by modern anti-caste thinkers from

[31] S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar: Suyamariyathai – Samadharmam* (Chennai: New Century Book House, 2017), 30.

[32] K. Veeramani, *Periyariyal Iramayana Aaivu Sorpozhivugam* (Chennai: Dravidar Kazhaga Veliyeedu, 2003), 4.

[33] Romila Thapar, "The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics," *Social Scientist* 24, no 1/3 (January – March, 1996): 3.

[34] Ibid., 5-6.

[35] Ibid.

marginalised communities to critique and subvert Brahminical oppression. For instance, Jyotirao Phule, from the Maratha region, regarded the era before the Aryans as a golden age for the natives of India, who were later subjugated and forced into lower-caste status by the invading Aryans. Phule unearthed this history from Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, which depict the original inhabitants as gory and repulsive *Asuras*, while the Aryans who defeated them are symbolically represented as the first five avatars of Vishnu—Matsya, Kurma, Narasimha, Vamana, and Parasuram.[36] This interpretive move demonstrates Phule's brilliance in applying the Aryan invasion theory to interpret Brahminical texts and myths, narrating the fall of egalitarian native rulers, peoples, and cultures following the invasion. Moreover, Phule's approach stands in sharp contrast to Max Müller's reading of the Rig Veda as an account of civilised Aryan invaders subjugating lesser-civilised natives.

Aryan Rama versus Adi-Dravida/ Dravidian Ravana

If Phule used the *Bhagavata Purana* to present the conflict between Aryans and non-Aryans, in the Tamil country the Ramayana served a similar purpose, initially employed by neo-Shaivites. In 1880, Somasundara Nayakar—the main spiritual inspiration behind the Saiva Siddhanta revivalist movement—read the Ramayana as a history of Vaishnavite subjugation of Shaivites.[37] However, the ideological descendants of Somasundara Nayakar, such as Sundaram Pillai, Ponnambalam Pillai, and J. M. Nallaswami Pillai, reinterpreted the Ramayana as a text that recorded the conflict between Aryans and Dravidians. Unlike Somasundara Nayakar, his successors were mostly English-educated, non-Brahmins of the Vellalar caste, well-versed in contemporary scholarship and discourses. They quickly embraced the new Dravidian identity, constructed by colonial administrators and missionary

[36] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 143.

[37] A. Gangatharam and A. Gangatharan, "Epic, Epistome and Ethnicity: Re-reading of the Ramayana in Modern Tamil Context," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 63 (2002): 881.

scholars in the Madras Presidency, linked it with their religion, and declared Saiva Siddhanta as the original religion of the Dravidians.[38]

According to these neo-Shaivite interpretations, Rama's arrival in Southern India and his victory over Ravanan—a staunch devotee of Shiva and an ethical ruler—marked a pivotal historical moment that led to the decline of Dravidian civilisation.[39] Sundaram Pillai, a Tamil scholar and philosophy teacher in Travancore, argued that caste based on birth was non-existent in the pre-Aryan Dravidian society, where social classification was determined by landscape and occupation. This system was highly flexible, allowing social mobility, inter-dining, and intermarriages.[40] It was only after the events of the Ramayana that a rigid caste system based on birth emerged in the Tamil region.[41] Beyond discussing these social transformations, Sundaram Pillai also defended Ravana's actions and raised a series of critical questions about Rama's ideals, including his alliances with betrayers of his own clan such as Sugriva and Vibheesana, the brutal killing of the Shudra Shambuka for performing Vedic rites, and the attack on Vaali in violation of battle rules.[42]

The perspectives of Sundaram Pillai and other neo-Shaivites on the Ramayana were not only published in journals such as *Malabar Quarterly* and *Tamilian Antiquary* and as standalone books, but were also popularised through public meetings of the Shaiva Siddhanta Sabha held in district towns across Tamil region.[43] Consequently, the neo-Shaivite reading of the Ramayana as a semi-historical narrative of Aryan invasion began to influence other non-Brahmin groups in the Madras Presidency and evolved into a widely circulated discourse. Members of the Justice Party, who, unlike the Tamil neo-Shaivites, used the term "Dravidian" to identify all non-Brahmin castes of South India across linguistic boundaries, condemned Aryan Brahmins for introducing their Puranas and the Ramayana into Tamil Nadu while neglecting indigenous

[38] For more on the engagement of Tamil neo-Shaivities with the Dravidian identity, see V. Ravi Vaithees, *Religion, Caste, and Nation in South India: Maraimalai Adigal, the Neo-Saivite Movement, and Tamil Nationalism, 1876-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[39] Ibid., 882.

[40] Sundaram Pillai, *Ramaayana Ullurai Porulum Thenindiya Saathi Varalarum*, 15.

[41] Ibid., 37.

[42] Ibid., 9-12.

[43] Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India,* 294.

literature.[44] Even non-Brahmin leaders within the Congress were influenced by this reading. Varadarajulu Naidu, a prominent congressman who later joined the Hindu Mahasabha, cited Rama's killing of Shambuka as a metaphor to describe the Brahmin domination within the Congress party in Madras Presidency.[45]

Apart from the neo-Shaivite reading of Ravana as a Dravidian, a devotee of Shiva, and an egalitarian ruler, since the late nineteenth century some thinkers also interpreted Ravana as a Buddhist king. For instance, Masilamoni Moodaliar, who was associated with the Madras Secular Society—an organisation that actively promoted atheism and rationalism between 1878 and 1888 in Madras—identified Rama and Krishna as naive rulers manipulated by Brahmins to serve their interests. He further interpreted demon figures in Hindu mythology, such as Hiranya and Ravana, as indigenous Buddhist kings who resisted Brahminical dominance and were subsequently expelled from their kingdoms.[46]. Interestingly, Iyothee Thass, a Tamil Dalit Buddhist icon who founded the Sakhya Buddhist Society in the final years of the nineteenth century and argued that Dalits in the Tamil region were originally Buddhists rendered untouchable after the advent of Brahmins, adopted an approach to the Ramayana that differed from that of Moodaliar. Despite his belief that Brahmins had 'invented' Hinduism by appropriating Buddhist elements, Thass did not interpret Ravana as a Buddhist king; instead, he subscribed to the Ramayana version preserved in the Buddhist Jataka tales, which depict Rama as one of the previous lives of the Gautama Buddha.[47] While the Jataka narrative may have prevented Iyothee Thass from reinterpreting Ravana as a Buddhist king, in his writings he portrayed other *asuras* in Hindu mythology—particularly Hiranyan and Mahabali—as just and egalitarian Buddhist rulers who were later demonised by Brahmins in the myths they composed.[48]

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[44] Ibid., 291.

[45] Athiyaman, *Ceeramaateevi*, 156.

[46] M. Masilamoni Moodaliar, *Varunabeda Vilakkam* in *Chennai Laukika Sangam,* ed. V. Arasu (Chennai: New Century Book House, 2012), 618-619.

[47] G. Aloysius, eds. *Iyotheethasar Sinthanaigal – II* (Palayamkottai: Folklore and Research Centre, St. Xavier's College, 1999), 105.

[48] Stalin Rajangam, "Iyothee Thaasar Ezhuthiya Iraniyan Kathai," Neelam, October 1, 2020, https://theneelam.com/a-story-on-fictional-character-iraniyan-in-ayothidasars-context/ (accessed on January 4, 2026).

Some Tamil Dalits also interpreted the Ramayana as a narrative about the subjugation of Dalits by both Brahmins and upper-caste non-Brahmins. For instance, in 1922, Tirisirapuram A. Perumal Pillai, a Dalit writer, published *Aathi Thiraavidar Varalaaru*, tracing the history of the *Adi-Dravidas*—a term he used for certain Dalit castes, including the Pariyars. Perumal Pillai read events from the Ramayana as a conflict between Aryans and the original inhabitants of Southern India. He also adopted Sundaram Pillai's view that the institution of caste emerged in South India after Rama's arrival.[49] However, Perumal Pillai distinguished between the Dravidians and the Adi Dravidians, claiming that Ravanan and other native Southern inhabitants were *Adi-Dravidas*, the original Dravidians.[50] Accordingly, some Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu were represented as descendants of Ravana, vanquished by the Aryan Rama. Interestingly, Perumal Pillai depicted Dravidians (non-Brahmins) as less civilised than the *Adi-Dravidas*, portraying them as assisting Rama in his conquest, while the Ramayana casts them as monkeys.[51] Despite drawing inspiration from Sundaram Pillai and being a devotee of Shiva, Perumal Pillai was not associated with the Saiva Siddhanta revivalist movement, which was predominantly composed of upper-caste Vellalas. His interpretation, therefore, reflects the double oppression experienced by Dalits—first by the Brahmins and subsequently by non-Brahmin Dravidians.

From this range of interpretations produced by different groups in the Tamil region, it is evident that by the 1920s the Ramayana had become part of the discourse and polemics of several non-Brahmin groups, serving as a medium to express their opposition to Brahminical domination. Hence, it is not surprising that Periyar—who had ridiculed the Ramayana since his youth and advocated for the interests of non-Brahmins within the Congress party—declared that the epic should be burnt if it served to maintain the caste system. However, because Periyar's writings and speeches prior to 1925, the year he launched his weekly magazine *Kudi Arasu*, are not adequately available, the extent to which the Ramayana featured in his early rhetoric remains unclear. It is noteworthy that even after launching *Kudi Arasu*, neither Periyar nor the cadres of the Self-Respect Movement expressed substantial criticism of the

[49] Gowthama Sanna, ed., *Aadthi Thiraavidar Varalaaru* (Chennai: Aazhi Publishers, 2019), 78.

[50] Ibid., 46.

[51] Ibid., 64.

Ramayana until the end of 1927. In fact, a contributor named Uthamar expressed disappointment in *Kudi Arasu* as Periyar rarely wrote against the Ramayana and its Aryan philosophy, and even then, only in an indirect manner. This contrasted with figures like V. S. Raman, who, in the Justice Party's mouthpiece *Dravidan*, openly argued that the Ramayana had deprived Tamils of dignity and self-respect for centuries.[52] Therefore, in the following section of this paper, I will argue that Gandhi was a major reason why Periyar remained largely silent about the Ramayana for this brief period, despite having declared in 1922 that the epic should be burnt and now also owning a magazine through which he could freely express his opinions. Before delving into that argument, it is necessary to briefly examine Gandhi's influence on Periyar.

The Gandhian phase of Periyar

Periyar associated himself with the Congress through the Madras Presidency Association from 1917 onwards. However, it was only after his visit to Amritsar, where he witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre firsthand,[53] and on Rajaji's persuasion that Periyar officially became a member of the Congress towards the end of 1919.[54] Even before formally joining, he was influenced by Gandhi. When the Mahatma called for the observance of April 6, 1919, as a day of Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act, Periyar helped organise meetings across several district centers in the Tamil region and participated as a speaker. After formally joining the Congress, a biographer notes that he began to "fanatically" support Gandhi's campaigns and methods of agitation,[55] immersing himself in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the temperance campaign, and the promotion of khaddar or khadi. Among Gandhi's initiatives, Periyar considered the campaign to abolish untouchability the most important, speaking extensively against both the caste system and untouchability.[56] During this Gandhian phase, he was invited by the leaders of the Kerala Congress to participate in the Vaikom Satyagraha, a movement

[52] Uthamar, "Iraamayanam Paarpana Pracharam," *Kudi Arasu,* October 23, 1927, 12.

[53] Thanthai Periyar, *Thathai Periyare Ezhuthiya Suyasarithai* (Chennai: Dravidar Kazhaga Veliyeedu, 2021), 31.

[54] Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker*, 23.

[55] Ibid., 38.

[56] S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar,* 29.

aimed at allowing untouchable castes to use public roads around the Mahadeva temple.[57] Though he was arrested multiple times during this struggle, his efforts earned him the title *Vaikom Veerar* (the hero of Vaikom). Periyar's active involvement in Gandhi's campaigns also caused him financial loss. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, he refrained from collecting surety bonds and documents worth fifty thousand rupees from the court, in accordance with the campaign's boycott of colonial institutions.[58] Later, during Gandhi's temperance campaign in 1921, Periyar successfully implemented the program in Erode—not only by organising picketing in front of arrack and toddy shops but also by cutting down thousands of palmyra and coconut trees on his estate, thereby suffering a permanent loss of income.[59]

As a devoted Gandhian, Periyar was deeply unhappy with the developments in the Congress following Gandhi's arrest in 1922. With the campaign against untouchability visibly slowing down, the question of Hindu–Muslim relations received far less attention than it deserved. Around this time, the Swaraj Party was formed by prominent Congress leaders such as Motilal Nehru and C. R. Das, and soon the Congress abandoned its boycott of council entry. Periyar sided with the "no-changers," who opposed council entry and advocated for a full programme of boycott and non-cooperation. For Periyar, the Congress had, since its inception, been largely dominated by Brahmins who were primarily interested in securing employment in government institutions.[60] It was this self-serving attitude, he believed, that left Muslims in northern India feeling neglected and marginalised, leading to communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims.[61] Yet, according to Periyar, this Brahminical character and outlook of the Congress underwent a drastic transformation with the arrival of Gandhi, who came from a non-Brahmin community. In a speech on "Gandhism" delivered at Thiruvarur, Periyar explained that Gandhi's idea of 'swaraj' essentially meant liberation for the poor and self-respect for the

[57] Visswanathan, *The Political Career*, 43.

[58] Ibid., 39.

[59] Ibid., 40.

[60] E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, "Congressil Iruppathaivida Irappathe Mel Yen? Ippothulla congress parpana congressaeh," *Kudi Arasu*, August 8, 1926, 3.

[61] "Hindu Muslim Abipraya Pethangalum Kalahangalum Yerpada Kaaranam Enna?," *Kudi Arasu*, July 11, 1926, 3.

oppressed.[62] Gandhi emphasised the use of khaddar (khadi), which he believed would eradicate rural poverty, and the abolition of untouchability, which he saw as essential to dismantling inequality and hierarchy. Moreover, his programme of non-cooperation was, for Periyar, the most effective method of achieving independence, as it united diverse sections of the population in the freedom struggle while simultaneously uplifting their social status.[63] However, the Brahmins—already dissatisfied with resolutions to boycott councils and government jobs—feared that Gandhi's plans, if fully implemented, would erode their hegemonic position in both political and cultural spheres. Gandhi was therefore consciously sidelined within the Congress by Brahmins in Tamil Nadu and North India,[64] who eventually captured the party for themselves. Periyar declared that it was "better to die than to remain in this Brahmin Congress" and longed for the return of the Mahatma's Congress.[65]

Such commitment to Gandhi's ideals did not diminish even after Periyar dissociated himself from the Congress.[66] When he launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1926, Periyar made the promotion of khaddar, the abolition of untouchability and other forms of inequality, and the temperance campaign among the key doctrines of the movement.[67] Having established Periyar's allegiance and respect for the Mahatma, I propose that his temporary silence on the Ramayana can nonetheless be attributed to Gandhi's devotion to Rama. While Richman and other scholars present the Ramayana as a continuous element of Periyar's rhetoric since 1922, they tend to overlook this period of silence. In the next section, I highlight and analyse this brief interlude and conjecture how Gandhi was a major reason for it.

[62] E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, "Thiruvaruril E.V. Raamasamy Naicker Avargal Pesiyathin Saaramsam," *Kudi Arasu*, April 18, 1926, 2.

[63] Naicker, "Congressil Iruppathaivida Irappathe Mel Yen," 3.

[64] "Hindu Muslim Abipraya Pethangalum,"3.

[65] "Suyarajyam," *Kudi Arasu*, November 12, 1925, 7.

[66] S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar,* 47.

[67] "Parpanarallathar Maanadu," *Kudi Arasu*, December 12, 1926.

Gandhi's devotion and Periyar's silence

Though Rama was the reigning deity of Gandhi's family, it was only at the age of thirteen that Gandhi became familiar with Tulasidas's *Ramacharitamanas*. When his father was ill, a Ram devotee named Ladha Maharaj would sing verses from Tulasidas's text and explain their meaning to the family. This early exposure laid the foundation for Gandhi's deep devotion to the Ramayana.[68] However, Gandhi's devotion to Rama extended beyond the text itself. Initially, he worshipped Rama as a divine figure in the Hindu epic—the husband of Sita and son of Dasharatha—but over the years, the meaning of Rama expanded for him.[69] In 1924, when a Vaishnavite objected to Gandhi referring to Rama in the singular, the Mahatma replied in *Navajivan*:

> I myself am a Vaishnava and that 'Shri Ramachandra Prabhu' is the *ishtadevata* worshipped in my family. Still, to me the name Rama is dearer, though I have written 'Shri Ramachandra Prabhu' for once here to satisfy this friend. 'Shri Ramachandra Prabhu' gives me the feeling that He is far away from me, whereas Rama is enthroned in my heart. Wherever I have made use of the sacred names, Rama…it seems to me that they express my overflowing love.[70]

Gandhi went on to write that Rama was his mother, father, brother, and everything else; he saw Rama in all men, which allowed him to keep everyone close to his heart.[71] Apart from this deep personal connection, Gandhi creatively used verses from Tulasidas's Ramayana to support political arguments and often explained his political activities by referring to Ramayana narratives. For instance, when asked about his inspiration for the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi cited a passage from *Sundar Khand* in which Sita boldly refuses to submit to Ravanan's wishes, despite being his prisoner.[72] For Gandhi, the present British rule was '*Ravana Rajya*' and needed

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[68] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmacaritamānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 378.

[69] Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography,* 30.

[70] Narendra Kaushik, "The Influence of Rama on Mahatma Gandhi," (Paper presented at World Ramayana Conference, Jabalpur, December 2016), 2.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 379.

to be replaced by '*Ram Rajya*,' which he defined as something higher than ordinary political emancipation. To achieve this *Ram Rajya*, he urged people to renounce all luxuries and live on bare necessities, enduring hardships as Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana did during their exile.[73] Moreover, Gandhi frequently invoked the Ramayana in his campaigns against untouchability, citing episodes such as Rama embracing Guha, the untouchable boatman, and pleading with caste Hindus to emulate this act of inclusion in contemporary India.[74]

Given that the Ramayana occupied a significant place in both the spiritual and political life of the Mahatma, I speculate that it was a major factor in Periyar's decision to remain largely silent about the epic and its protagonist, Rama. While he frequently translated and re-published Gandhi's articles from *Young India* and *Navajivan* in *Kudi Arasu*, none of these were primarily about the Ramayana, although a few referred to the epic in passing.[75] This selective re-publication indicates Periyar's discomfort in employing the Ramayana for nationalist purposes. Since reading the Ramayana as a tale of Aryan invasion and as a historical account of the introduction of caste in southern India was already popular among various non-Brahmin groups in the Madras Presidency, I argue that Periyar—well aware of these discourses—could neither endorse Gandhi's devotion to Rama nor, out of respect for Gandhi, openly attack the epic.

Consequently, during the first two years of *Kudi Arasu*, neither Periyar nor other members of the Self-Respect Movement wrote or spoke extensively against the Ramayana. Occasionally, however, Periyar made brief references to the epic while discussing Brahmin hegemony. For example, in a meeting held in Chennai on 29 July 1926, where he declared that it was better to die than remain part of the Brahmin Congress, he mentioned that texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Harichandra Purana*, and *Iranya Purana* reflected the conflict between Brahmins and non-Brahmins.[76] His declaration at the 1922 Tiruppur conference that the Ramayana should be burnt was an exceptional

[73] Kaushik, "The Influence of Rama on Mahatma Gandhi," 4.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Mahatma Gandhi, "Hindu Samaya Maanpu Kurutu Nambikkai Vendaam," *Kudi Arasu*, May 23, 1926, 5.

[76] Naicker, "Congressil Iruppathaivida Irappathe Mel Yen," 3.

statement, and no similarly daring or unsympathetic remarks about the epic were recorded from Periyar until the end of 1927. Nevertheless, we should be cautious not to conclude that Periyar was universally reluctant to critique anything that was dear to Gandhi.

Let us take the case of the *Manusmriti*, another Hindu text that Periyar criticised throughout his life. Gandhi wrote,

> I do not regard *Manusmriti* as an evil. It contains much that is admirable, but in its present form it undoubtedly contains many things that are bad, and these appear to be interpolations. Whilst a reformer would therefore treasure all excellent things in that ancient code, he would expurgate all that is injurious or of doubtful value.[77]

Despite this nuanced view, Periyar was not interested in salvaging the "excellent things" from the *Manusmriti*. Even during his Gandhian phase, he attacked it vehemently, in stark contrast to his temporary silence regarding the Ramayana. He repeatedly wrote that the *Manusmriti* was responsible for the exploitation and humiliation of non-Brahmins at the hands of Brahmins, who, in his view, had caused more damage to Hindu religion than the British had done to India. He criticised the text for designating lower castes as Shudras, implying that they were offsprings of prostitutes or slaves.[78] From the beginning, Periyar also disagreed with Gandhi on the question of *Varnashrama Dharma*, a fundamental principle underpinning caste hierarchy. This divergence eventually led him to renounce Gandhian life and break his silence on the Ramayana.

Confronting Gandhi, confronting Rama

Towards the end of his life, Gandhi became a social revolutionary, advocating intermarriage between Brahmins and untouchables as a means to dismantle the caste system, and he hoped that "when all become casteless, monopoly of

[77] Pallikonda Manikanta, "Symbols Serve Oppressors, That is Why Manu Must Fall," *The Wire*, November 3, 2020, https://thewire.in/caste/symbols-serve-oppressors-that-is-why-manu-must-fall.

[78] "Theendamaikku Yaar Poruppali? Palakkattil 144-kku Yaar Poruppali," *Kudi Arasu* November 22, 1926, 2.

occupation would go."[79] However, in the 1920s, despite launching campaigns to abolish untouchability, Gandhi strongly believed that caste preserved Hinduism from disintegration and argued that the hundreds of castes should be classified into four basic *varnas*. While maintaining that there was no question of superiority or inferiority within the *varna* system, he held that every Hindu must follow their hereditary occupation, and that prohibiting intermarriage between different *varnas* was necessary for the rapid evolution of the soul.[80] In contrast, Periyar regarded the annihilation of *Varnashrama Dharma* and the caste system as essential to abolishing untouchability and consistently expressed these views in his speeches and writings.[81] However, according to Geetha and Rajadurai, Periyar neither addressed nor directly challenged Gandhi on the matter of *Varnashrama Dharma* for some time. He began to critique the Mahatma more vocally only from the mid-1927 onwards, in response to crucial political developments at both the national and provincial levels.[82]

Despite Gandhi's earlier strong opposition to council entry, the 1925 Kanpur Congress Conference marked the end of the rivalry between the Swaraj Party and the Congress, and it was decided that Congressmen would campaign for the Swarajists in the upcoming elections. In the elections held in the Madras Presidency in November 1926, the Swaraj Party secured a majority, defeating the Justice Party, which had been supported by Periyar and his Self-Respect Movement. Following this victory, at the Guwahati Conference, S. Srinivasa Iyengar—who had harshly criticised Gandhi's methods of non-cooperation and joined the Swaraj Party—was elected as All-India Congress President.[83] For the preceding years, Periyar had focused much of his energy on attacking Srinivasa Iyengar and other Tamil Brahmins for opportunism. He regularly wrote that while several non-Brahmin Congressmen, including himself, took Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement seriously and went to prison multiple times, Brahmin Congressmen like Srinivasa Iyengar were unwilling even to

[79] Mark Lindley, "Changes in Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Caste and Intermarriage," *Hacettepe University Journal of Social Sciences 1* (2002).

[80] Ibid.

[81] S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar*, 34.

[82] Ibid., 39.

[83] Ibid., 52-53.

renounce their professions or boycott government institutions.[84] Under these circumstances, in 1927, it was announced that Gandhi would tour Tamil Nadu to promote khaddar. Periyar, who had earlier believed that Gandhi's actions would liberate the oppressed and challenge Brahmin hegemony, began to question whether the Mahatma had ever truly considered the plight of the non-Brahmins. Surrounded by Brahmins who prevented him from witnessing the growing tensions between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Periyar concluded that Gandhi would not address this pressing issue any time soon, and that his Tamil Nadu tour would likely be little more than a ceremonial procession akin to that of a Shankaracharya.[85]

Periyar's perception that Gandhi was aligning more closely with Brahmins and compromising with the Swarajists prompted him to openly challenge Gandhi's views on *Varnashrama Dharma*. A few weeks before Gandhi's visit to Tamil Nadu, at a public meeting held in Mysore on the abolition of untouchability, Gandhi asserted that *Varnashrama Dharma* was essential for Hindu society and that each *varna* must follow its assigned occupation. In response, Periyar wrote an editorial titled *"Gandhi and Varnashrama,"* in which he argued that Gandhi's views were no different from the resolutions recently passed at a Brahmin conference.[86] Hoping to persuade Gandhi to reconsider his stance, Periyar and S. Ramanathan, a prominent member of the Self-Respect Movement, met Gandhi before his Tamil Nadu trip and expressed their deep concerns. However, neither side was able to influence the other, as their views were fundamentally opposed. In that conversation, Periyar emphasised that if India were to achieve both independence and self-respect, three institutions must be destroyed: the Indian National Congress, Hinduism, and Brahminism.[87] Significantly, in the article reporting this meeting, Periyar criticised Gandhi for employing Aryan Puranas—such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and *Bhagavata Purana*—in his speeches, warning that such strategies could ultimately harm Gandhi.[88] In the following weeks, *Kudi Arasu* continuously published articles highlighting Gandhi's propagation of

[84] Ibid., 51.

[85] "Bayappadukirom Mahatma Gandhiyin Tamilnatu Vijayam," *Kudi Arasu*, August 21, 1927, 9.

[86] "Mahatmavum Varunasiramum I," *Kudi Arasu,* August 8, 1927, 8.

[87] "Mahatmavum Varunasiramum II," *Kudi Arasu*, August 28, 1927, 8.

[88] Ibid., 9.

Varnashrama Dharma throughout his Tamil Nadu tour. One such article, titled *"Mahatma Gandhi and the Brahminical Campaign,"* condemned Gandhi for narrating the Ramayana at a women's meeting in Vellore. Referring to Rama's killing of Shambuka, the article warned readers: "If the Ram Rajya advocated by Gandhi and the Brahmins were to come into existence, could the Shudras even pray to their gods without fear?"[89]

Hence, Periyar and other members of the Self-Respect Movement unleashed fierce criticisms of the Ramayana once Periyar began confronting Gandhi openly on the issues of *Varnashrama Dharma* and his alliance with Brahmins. This confrontation gave the Self-Respect Movement a new purpose: the annihilation of the Congress, Hindu religion, and Brahminical hegemony. This new agenda differed from the movement's earlier aims—such as the abolition of untouchability, temperance campaigns, and promotion of khaddar—which had been largely derived from Gandhi's ideals and vision. As the movement pursued its new objectives, the gulf between Periyar and Gandhi widened. This shift is reflected in the change of *Kudi Arasu*'s slogan. From its inception until November 13, 1927, the magazine carried the line, "Long live Mahatma Gandhi" on its front page. In the next issue, the slogan was changed to "Long live Khaddar,"[90] which was itself dropped by the last week of December—signaling Periyar's complete departure from Gandhi.[91]

Since the Ramayana was central to the three elements Periyar sought to destroy, articles exclusively attacking the epic began appearing in *Kudi Arasu*. Not only did Periyar and the core members of the Self-Respect Movement critique the Ramayana, but allies of the movement, such as neo-Shaivites, and general readers were also given space in the magazine to articulate their perspectives. One columnist even adopted the pseudonym *Ravanadasan* ("servant of Ravanan") and wrote that, just as the humane and brave monarch Ravanan is depicted as a demon in Brahminical narratives, Periyar himself might one day be remembered as a *Rakshasa*.[92] In 1928, when the Self-Respect Movement launched the English weekly *The Revolt*, the Ramayana discourse

[89] "Mahatma Gandhiyum Parpana Pracharamum," *Kudi Arasu*, September 4, 1927, 9.

[90] *Kudi Arasu*, November 20, 1927.

[91] *Kudi Arasu*, December 25, 1927.

[92] Thirisirapuram Ravanadasan, "Suyamariyathai Ethir Oli Iramayanathai Tholaikka Vendum," *Kudi Arasu*, November 13, 1927, 14.

extended into that space as well. While some contributors, like Gurusami, read the Ramayana as a tale of Aryan conquest over the Dravidians, others exposed the sexual perversities and morally questionable qualities of its characters, stripping the epic of its sanctity. In 1930, Periyar published his most famous text, *Iramayanappatirankal*, which remains in print today along with English and Hindi translations. The rhetoric against the Ramayana was not limited to print media; it also resonated in the public meetings of the Self-Respect Movement, becoming an indispensable and enduring part of its activism.

Conclusion

Previous scholarship on Periyar's engagement with the Ramayana has largely focused on a few of his writings, rarely considering the perspectives of other members of the Self-Respect Movement. This narrow approach creates the impression that criticism of the Ramayana within the movement was static and unchanging. My study, in contrast, demonstrates that these polemics evolved over time, reflecting broader socio-political shifts, eliciting diverse reactions, and producing significant influence within Tamil society.

Three key factors contributed to the emergence and evolution of Ramayana criticism in the Self-Respect Movement. First, from his youth, Periyar exhibited an iconoclastic disposition, questioning and debunking core elements of Hinduism—including caste, Brahmins, rituals, and the Puranas. The Ramayana naturally became a target of his early irreverence, though this engagement lacked any larger political agenda. What distinguished Periyar was his ability to articulate these critiques compellingly, attracting audiences even in informal settings, and laying the groundwork for his lifelong antagonism toward the epic.

Second, the rise of Aryan invasion discourse provided a political framework for understanding the Ramayana as a narrative of conquest. Inspired by nineteenth-century anti-caste thinkers like Phule, Tamil neo-Shaivites and Dalit intellectuals, Periyar encountered interpretations of the Ramayana as the story of Aryan domination over the South, with Ravanan reimagined as an egalitarian Dravidian king. This reading gave a historical-political dimension to the epic, culminating in Periyar's bold 1922 assertion at the Tiruppur Congress conference that the Ramayana should be burnt.

Third, Periyar's temporary silence on the epic following the launch of the Self-Respect Movement can be attributed to his respect for Gandhi, whose deep devotion to Rama and idealization of Ram Rajya made a direct attack politically and personally complex. During this period, references to the Ramayana in *Kudi Arasu* were rare and largely indirect, limited to discussions on Aryan invasions and Brahminical hegemony. Yet, Gandhi's influence was paradoxically also the catalyst for Periyar's eventual full-throated critique. By late 1927, as he openly confronted Gandhi on issues such as Varnashrama Dharma and Brahminical dominance, the Ramayana became a central focus of criticism, appearing consistently in *Kudi Arasu* and other Self-Respect Movement publications, and extending to public meetings and allied forums.

In conclusion, Periyar's engagement with the Ramayana cannot be seen as static or isolated. It emerged from a combination of early irreverence, exposure to anti-caste interpretations, and his evolving political and ideological relationship with Gandhi. Over time, criticism of the Ramayana became a defining feature of the Self-Respect Movement, intertwining social reform, anti-Brahminism, and political assertion, and continuing to shape debates on caste, religion, and cultural authority in Tamil society.

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Repositories of Performing Bodies and the Performance Archive: Devadasis in Tamil Nadu

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The presence and gradual disappearance of devadasi women from the public sphere were the products of a reform movement embroiled in nationalist politics, negotiated by issues of gender, religion, and caste. The absence of devadasi women occurred simultaneously with the emergence of new identities like icai velalars in the political sphere, and new art forms like Bharatanatyam. To investigate the uniquely shifting position of women in the devadasi community in 20th century national politics, their history is analysed through the archives residing in their performance, their bodies, aesthetics, and memories. Such a study expands the ambit of understanding of the devadasi identity and brings their occupational experience as performers to the forefront.

Keywords: Performance archive, Devadasi, Bharatanatyam, 20th Century, Religious reform

Methodological Note

This study aims to explore new implications of the developments in the dance form, earlier known as *Sadir*—present day Bharatanatyam—through the employment of theories regarding the 'performance archive' and performance studies. The re-imagination of *sadir*, which transformed the dance space in modern India, was constantly in dialogue with historical conceptions of origins and tradition, and further aimed to define a new value of culture in the global landscape. The objectives and contradictions within this process are analysed through a study of the performance, its performers, as well as a critique of the archive that is aimed to be produced.

Though performance, in its ephemerality, and the archive, in its stable, eternal capacity, are generally seen to be oppositional, they are intimately related and concerned with one another. The archive is no longer a place of physical storage or written documents, but rather is expanded into popular memory. This retention plays a role in its historicity and politics by way of visibility and

erasure. The archive doesn't simply exist; rather, it is constructed by, and for, interests in mediums beyond print. The perspectives and details that remain uncaptured in the written material continue to manifest themselves through performance—not only the repertoire, but beyond that into the performers, their circumstances, visibility, their relation with the state and economy, and presentation. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade underline Dwight Conquergood's criticism of the "hegemony of the academic text as the conventional outcome of performance research, and calls for the acknowledgement of performance as a form of scholarly representation that can bring the performance paradigm much further by thinking of performance "as a complement, alternative, supplement, and critique of inscribed texts"."[1]

Diana Taylor justifies this interest in the history and visibility of the performance through the question that she poses: "Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?"[2] Further clarification is required here regarding the terminology of '*sadir*' or '*dasiattam*.' Bharatanatyam and *Sadir* are generally considered to be sequential products of South Indian dance, with the former being an attempt, in the 20th century, to produce a secular version that was sequestered from the temple/ritual associations of the latter. Though the term Bharatanatyam arose in 1932-33 and the Devadasi Bill was passed in 1947, there was no concrete definition or consensus amongst artists on what the new dance form must be. In the coming years, there were competing interpretations of the form, as well as concerns about the degradation of the quality of the dance. Due to this ambiguous definition, the term *sadir* is used sparingly, instead preferring to distinguish between the performers—as devadasis/hereditary dancers and non-hereditary dancers. Consequently, the term Bharatanatyam is retained, not as referring to the exact imagination of Rukmini Devi Arundale, but instead simply to the product of the entire reform movement as it exists in popular imagination today.

[1] Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade. "Introduction: The Archive in Performance Studies," in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* ed. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013): 9-34.

[2] Ibid., 15.

Introduction

Reform on the eve of colonial India was bathed in contested narratives of a nation in the making, negotiating the lines between religion and gender. The birth of Bharatanatyam and its recreation in the hands of Rukmini Devi Arundale have received significant critique and contestation, often platforming issues of caste and the experiences of the women of the Devadasi community. Resolutions, constitutional legislations, memorandums, and court proceedings, capture their history through written archives to trace the socio-political interests leading to the eventual abolition of the ritual practice in 1947. Histories of communities across Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh came forth in varied attempts to define and position themselves in the emerging political landscape. The radical existence of a community of women in non-conjugal relationships, where matriliny was observed as the norm, and negotiated through professional obligation to religious (and by extension, caste observing) institutions, determined the unique debates that took place.

Individuals like Muthulakshmi Reddy, belonging to a 'dual lineage,' proposed legislation advocating for the ban. Simultaneously, national leaders like Gandhi articulated critiques consistent with their ideas of immorality and reform. At the same time voices from Brahmin communities emerged from both sides—abolitionist and anti-abolitionist. Men associated with devadasi communities, fashioned as a new caste of "*icai vaelalar*" musician-artists, began to advocate for abolition and criminalisation of devadasi lifestyles as well.[3] To capture such nuances, derived primarily from and extended through the existence of devadasis as an integral part of South India's religious and artistic history, this study has extended investigation to the performance archives contained within their bodies, as nautch girls. Performance itself serves as an alternative archive, where the understanding extends beyond the textual sources. Issues of caste and gender remain at the forefront, and so does the prevalence of written sources. However, they are appended by analyses of memory, music, the body, and performance to expand on the artistic implications of a brand new, yet colonially tainted nationality.

[3] Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 147.

As the presence of devadasis declined in temples, courts, salons, and even cinema, their departure signified the crystallisation of a new ideation of gender, morality, and caste, which continues to make itself visible today. Rukmini Devi Arundale's 'reformation' of Bharatanatyam, as it is understood in the common lexicon, is one in a long line of events that obscure the chronological considerations that devadasis maintain with modernity. Indeed, even in the present day, Bharatanatyam contends with issues of tradition and an immemorial repertoire considered untouched. Arundale, for one, harkened back to the temple as the primary site for dance as a cumulative practice of spirituality, Puranic scriptures, and worship, regardless of the historical evidence present, while attempting to expand the ambit of instruction that she provided at Kalakshetra.[4]

The practice of the "nautch girl," which is often traced back to the Sangam Age (c. 300 BCE – 300 CE),[5] was accused of falling into "civilisational degeneration" in modern times and was equated with prostitution. The following "reform" hinged upon a simplistic and puritanical recreation of Bharatnatyam as part of an ahistorical Hindu legacy, which sought to erase the numerous influences that had enabled devadasis to move beyond temple spaces, further implicating state and caste interests.

The Court, Temple, and Beyond

The term devadasi was used to refer to a vague, yet charged, identity of women who were dedicated to temples and sexually exploited and in dire need of immediate reform and rescue. A closer look at the terminology provides nuance to their identity and questions the historical depth often attributed to the devadasi community. Concubinage, prostitution, temple dedication, and dance all "collapsed"[6] into the term devadasi. According to Davesh Soneji, the devadasi only coherently comes to be during the Nayaka period, asserting that "a critical reading of courtesan dance, however, can only

[4] Gillian McCann, "Performing Gender, Class and Nation: Rukmini Devi Arundale and the Impact of Kalakshetra," *South Asia Research* 39 no. 3S (September 2019): 61-79.

[5] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 30.

[6] Ibid., 30.

begin with the Telugu-speaking Nayaka courts at Tanjore and Madurai in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."[7]

Furthermore, the focus on the temple as the site of said exploitation is revealed to be a modern insertion in responses to discussions surrounding moral depravity in 20th century Madras. The temple, thus, emerges as a unique location, emblematic of Tamil antiquity and the relationship between the state and religion struggling with modernity. In fact, modern awareness continues to portray South Indian architecture as a primary associate of Bharatanatyam,[8] and the opportunity to perform in temples is seen as a 'return to roots.' Lastly, the texts, musical genres, aesthetic practices, and patron relations associated with the devadasi could only be traced as far back as the Nayaka period. Therefore, to understand the term devadasi, its origins and functions, we must limit the temporal scope of wide, open-ended concepts like dance or temples and focus on colonial Tanjore.

Labour Economies and Obligations

Courtly orders decreed in 19th century Tanjore operated in a number of ways that curtailed and defined the role of women as part of a larger system representing gender under colonial scrutiny, in a state relieved of all administrative control of the kingdom (save for the Tanjore Fort itself). The Social hierarchisation of women delineated their roles, responsibilities, and privileges, informing us about various expectations held of women who were visibly associated with the state. Concubines housed in *Mahals* and *Vilasams* were adorned with titles such as *bai* or *ammal*, and their relationship with the king was often defined through rituals like "sword marriages" (*katti kalayanam*).[9] Far from being considered a disgrace to the courts, they enjoyed a number of opportunities and freedoms which legitimised their relationship with the administration.

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[7] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 30.

[8] "*The Hindu philosophy of the cosmic man and its religious relationship with the Dravidian architecture of Tamil Nadu is the starting point of the discussion of a south Indian aesthetic… The culmination of this research aims to reinstate the importance of architecture as a cultural nexus in order to restring a fragmented dance, community and cultural identity.*" see Kavitha Jayakrishnan, "Dancing architecture: The Parallel Evolution of Bharatanatyam and South Indian architecture," (PhD Thesis, University of Waterloo, Ontario, 2011), 5.

[9] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 34.

What is perhaps more interesting, however, are the limitations placed on the lives and practices of these women. A set of Maratha court records–known as the *Modi records*,[10] describes the restrictions that were placed on their bodies in terms of behaviour and dressing. They were, thus, subjected to various codified expectations which emerged in a number of princely states under the strict eye of the colonial empire. It is demonstrated that these women were closely associated with the courts as well, rather than with just the temple in an exclusive manner.

One of the reasons behind this assumption of temple bondage is the controversial *pottukkattual* ritual. Devadasi communities were accused of dedicating young women under the age of consent, en masse, through this ritual, understood as 'marriage to god.' The implication of institutionalised child marriage in light of 20th century social reform is clear, revealing the moral anxieties these accusations hoped to evoke amongst the people. Women who underwent the ritual were often invited to perform in temples, courts, festivals, and other spaces. The *pottukkattual* ritual permitted the individual to take part in daily rituals of temples, however it was seldom considered necessary for courtesans to undergo it, and a large number of them never did. In effect, the ritual often took place in the homes of devadasis.[11] Concepts of "theogamy" and temple dedication overly simplify and corrupt the idea of such communities. No doubt they engaged in non-conjugal activities, finding expression and power in a sexual economy that was patriarchal in nature. But such oversimplifications distort the women's image, often reducing their lifestyle to being depraved and subjugated. As Nrithya Pillai outlines:

> This marking as an artist also **allowed these women to liaise with powerful men**. Is that prostitution? I don't think so. In fact, I think it **was much better than the exclusively caste endogamous and oppressive marriages that women from all communities were subjected to around this time**. Women have been oppressed by men for long, **but women from courtesan castes enjoyed freedoms that**

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 40.

> **were often not even afforded to upper-caste women**.[12] (emphasis added)

It is counter-intuitive to define the *pottukkattual* in terms of a "sexual bondage" to the temple. These ideas of temple attachments find no mention in the Modi records and, in some instances, the *pottukkattual* was similar to the "sword marriages" of concubines to Maratha kings, in that devadasis were wedded to an aspect of the deity, Murugan's spear, rather than the deity himself.

What was more defined, however, was the professional relationship some of these women held with the court and elsewhere. These women had to obtain permission from the court administration to perform beyond their expected locations, and were even punished in cases of transgression.[13] The court held up these expectations as part of the professional affiliation that they shared with performers, involving economic remuneration. This value extended to the devadasis and their patrons outside the courts as well. Devadasis were generally instructed to select patrons based on social and economic status. Accounts range from warnings against associating with patrons of lower caste than themselves, to restrictions limiting them solely to Brahmin patrons.[14] This is not only indicative of the position of the patron themselves, but also the status to be preserved by the devadasi.

Anne-Marie Gaston describes that dealings with the "lowest castes" were, indeed, frowned upon enough for her to be tried by a Panchayat. Similarly, association with "a *Mohammadan*, a blacksmith, a goldsmith, or a *chetti*, a *nokkam*, or any man of low caste" was punishable with penalties and/or fines.[15] She further mentions that "it was necessary to be careful where one

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[12] Aditi Mruti, "Tell Me More: Talking Caste Dynamics in Bharatanatyam With Nrithya Pillai," *The Swaddle*, April 17, 2021, accessed November 30, 2025, www.theswaddle.com/tell-me-more-talking-caste-dynamics-in-bharatanatyam-with-nrithya-pillai.

[13] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 40.

[14] "*All handsome girls are trained to dance and sing and are keeps of brahmins*": Anne-Marie Gaston, "*Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*," (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), 41.

[15] The occupations and names are probably in reference to castes. It must also be noted that such restrictions were not absolute and could be overlooked by way of exceedingly wealthy patrons – "Money could overcome some of the taboos. Muslim officers paid "lavishly for their entertainment"" see Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 41

performed,"[16] thus suggesting that beyond an unsuitable patron, the act of even performing in the home of such an individual could invite punishment. Here the location—the stage, temple or court—holds significance to the dance and body of the performer themselves whose art cannot be alienated from its physical context.[17]

Such specifics illustrate the similarities to caste hierarchies and better place the status of the devadasi in a larger societal network. The devadasi mentioned above was given the opportunity to 'purify' herself by drinking the '*panchagavyam,*' in the same manner as an upper caste person would after some interaction or contact with a lower caste.[18] Such intricacies in the workings of devadasis help us understand their status within society, in addition to the treatment meted out to them. The observation of purification rituals demonstrates that besides the patron, the body of the devadasi herself, her status, location, and access were to be managed and preserved as well. The *Modi records* include examples of women who were promised rewards or compensation,[19] and many women often appealed to have their children go through the *pottukkattual* in order to induct them into the courtly economy. These transactions point towards a distinct relationship with bodily labour, be it through dance or sexual activity, rather than religious degeneration expressed only within the temple.

"God Save the King" and Hindustani for the Devadasi

The nature of bodily labour extracted from these women makes it clear that they functioned along professional and, by extension, artistic lines through their dance. The idea of the dancer-courtesan has found pan-Indian recognition. Its aesthetics have found celebration in certain genres of Hindi cinema, like *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), and *Umrao Jaan* (1981). While the socio-economic relations that constrained these women are often the

[16] Ibid., 42.

[17] A.P. Rajaram, "From Oblivion to Acceptance: Sadir Dancer Muthukannammal's Presence as a Challenge to Representations" in *Performance Making and the Archive,* ed. Ashutosh Potdar, Sharmistha Saha (New York: Routledge, 2023), 71-82.

[18] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 42.

[19] *"The record states that she is to be given one kalam of paddy every month and one-and-a-half handfuls of cooked rice a day." see* Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 41.

topic of discussion, their performances, too, reveal much about their lives and practices. As mentioned earlier, the new courtly practices of the Tanjore court were negotiated keeping in mind colonial audiences, be it immediate or as part of "global circuits of culture."[20] Western music was entertained in the courts of King Serfoji, and English artists were invited and paid to perform. The *Modi records* refer to a wide variety of instruments being manufactured in Tanjore itself as it immersed itself within a syncretic culture of its own creation. What is unique, however, is its penetration into the sphere of dance. "Social dancing," like the waltz, was carried out in the courts, and even devadasis danced to English songs such as "God Save the King" under the instruction and training of European musicians.[21]

More significant, perhaps, was the presence of Hindustani music in the same spheres. Artists from Gwalior were invited and kept on the payroll of the palace to exclusively teach and train dancers of the court. Musical forms like dhrupad, khyal, tappa find mention in records. The entry of North Indian courtesans probably followed the musicians. Paintings even show South Indian *dasis* adorned in saris and jewellery alongside North Indian courtesans in Mughal attire. It is possible that a similar courtesan culture observed in the northern regions made assimilation easier. The integration of what would be considered an "alien" aesthetic into the colonial, westernised, courtly economy of dancer-courtesans shatters the idea of an untouched and isolated institution which had fallen into ruin.

The dance performed by the devadasis was, hence, part of a wider range of aesthetics which found state patronage in light of colonial and global considerations, as well as collaboration and integration of musical forms like Hindustani. When it came time to 'reform' the art of the devadasis in the creation of Bharatanatyam, such influences were all but rejected in Rukmini Devi Arundale's mission, as she "always emphasised on the spiritual message."[22] McCann explains how this larger mission aligned with colonial periodisation and "leapfrogged" European or Muslim influence in the interest of "retrieving the so-called golden age often associated with the Vedic

[20] Ibid., 29.

[21] Ibid., 54.

[22] McCann, "Performing Gender, Class and Nation," 67S.

period."[23] Decades later, these influences have been ejected from the popular conception of the artform, its public performance and perhaps even from the imaginations of artists themselves.

Music, Lyric, and Eroticism: Interpreting Performance

The Tanjore Quartet comprised four brothers, musicians of the Tanjore court, who were celebrated as radical innovators. They have also been mentioned in contemporary Bharatanatyam compositions, choreographies, and performances. The creation of the *margam,* for example, a seven-step sequence carried out in solo performance to this day (*alarippu-jatisvaram-sabdam-varnam-padam-tillana-sloka*), is generally credited to the Quartet.[24] Their work can be seen as a collaboration with pre-existing dance and aesthetic cultures. Additionally, they also exercised significant power by appointing and training dancers for events like the *Carapentira Pupala Kuravañci*, an annual programme at the Tanjore court.[25] The dance and music culture had primarily revolved around lyrical poetry. These songs are traced to the Telugu genre known as Padam, which was often peppered with eroticism. This often-found innovations through new works in praise of the king and other forms of composition that were used for staging the competency of the king, perhaps in light of his "hollow" rule. The interpretation of the lyrics by the dancers further expressed this aesthetic sensibility that was often scorned upon. This dance presented in the court was not linear in its storytelling; instead, it was often cyclical. This resulted in the *abhinaya* of the dancer gaining prominence through gestures, movements, expressions, and attitudes, and it was eventually brought to the forefront of performances.

Characters in these songs, often dedicated to kings (such as 17th century King Sahaji) and deities (such as Siva-Tyagaraja), were themselves courtesans, or at least maintained a vital role in the tales being conveyed or performed. Therefore, not only did these songs maintain the "depraved" identity of the dancers through their art, but they also situated them permanently within the realm of courtly culture. Courtesans also indulged in writing, often creating

[23] Ibid., 61S-79S.
[24] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 58.
[25] Ibid., 61.

celebrated works of their respective periods.[26] These songs are often erotic and represent not just desire present amongst such communities, but also the artistic ability to articulate such feelings without the fear of state retribution. Soneji laments the lack of details in records regarding the sexual activity of courtesans, claiming that only "personal narratives and ethnography"[27] could address the gap. In this regard, perhaps the self-written music of devadasis can inform us, even if the material is representational and artistic.

Upon the death of Sivaji in 1855, the English East India Company was prepared to dismantle the already weakened throne of the Raja. Despite being retained in the hands of Queen Victoria, state patronage for dance and music declined significantly. The year 1887 witnessed one of the last courtesan dances performed in Tanjore Palace. As a result, Tanjore witnessed a large-scale migration of artists over a long period of time, who moved to Madras. Their identity as 'nautch girls' provided them with opportunities in Madras, in what Soneji calls 'salon dance/performances,'[28] and in the new industry of cinema.

Bhakti and Sringara Rasa

The eroticism that constituted a major part of this musical corpus was not simply in service of a personal corruption at the hands of the devadasi, as is implied by abolitionists. Besides finding roots in the literary genre of Telugu Padam, eroticism also relates to the much older concepts of the bhakti and the *navarasa*, specifically *sringara rasa*. Bhakti, often translated as devotion, is seen across all the classical Hindu performing arts, argued to be their "raison d'être."[29] This bhakti is expressed through the *navarasa* (nine rasas) originally conceptualised in the *Natyashastra*, a treatise on performing arts and theory written by Bharata Muni. Of the *navarasa*, *sringara rasa* occupies a unique position when considered in light of the role of eroticism in dance.

[26] *"…works by Ramabhadramba and Rangajamma, for example, are considered among the crowning literary pieces from this [Nayaka] period..."* Ibid., 30.

[27] Ibid., 38.

[28] Ibid., 5.

[29] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam,* 87.

Sringara rasa, that is romance, attraction, and love can serve as a metaphor for the pursuit of the divine. This divinity may then be represented by an earthly avatar of the deity within the narrative, or be transposed onto the kingly patron who was often named after gods themselves.

> Human love, physical passion, became the perfect analogy for divine love, the spiritual passion. As secular language was used to describe religious love, so too was religious language used to describe secular love.
>
> The supreme Bhagavan (God) took on the form of a lover so that the devotee could gain access to the sacred, the infinite, and eternal through expression rather than suppression of earthly desires.[30]

Sringara rasa, thus, stood as a physical manifestation of the quest and union with the divine by utilising accessible and observable states of the lover. The rasa may take on psychological states based on either the presence or absence (or separation, called *viraha*) of the lover. Through bhakti, the conceptual existence of the divine is brought into the physical realm and tied to the most personal aspects of romance. Since the divine may never be tangibly experienced, the *sringara rasa* is said to reach its peak at times of separation.[31]

Since the kingly patron and the divine find simultaneous reference, there is an obvious collapse of this purely virtual image of the divine. This invited critiques regarding the far more literal meaning of expressing *sringara rasa,* with Rukmini Devi Arundale possibly mounting the most scathing condemnation. To Arundale, the references made to the patron within music and dance defined the acceptability of the exercise, and she challenged the equal reverence that was shown to him and the deity, abstracted through performance.[32] Along with this came a broader disagreement in the manner in which bhakti was to be depicted in dance. On the other hand, devadasis like T Balasaraswati argued for *sringara rasa* as a legitimate form of bhakti. She insisted that the *sringara rasas* were supreme in *abhinaya,* and yet, never 'carnal.'

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., 89.

[32] Ibid., 90.

> Sringara stands supreme in the range of emotions. No other emotion is better capable of reflecting the mystic union of the human with the divine, I say this with deep personal experience of dancing to many great devotional songs which have had no element of sringara in them. Devotional songs are of course necessary. However, sringara is the cardinal emotion (Balasaraswati in Sruti 1984, March).[33]

Gaston broadly interpreted Balasaraswati's argument as follows: "I would suggest that she felt the erotic, in the context of the dance, to be without connotations of sexual arousal, but merely to be a vehicle by which extreme emotion could be projected. This is at the heart of bhakti."[34] The public arguments and debates between these two personalities are often used to epitomise the difference of opinion. Rukmini Devi Arundale and T. Balasaraswati both represented their dance philosophy, one as a Brahmin and the other as a devadasi, and both contested the dance language in a transitional phase. For Arundale, reference to bhakti and sringara rasa was represented by conventional devotion to the divine which did not make use of sexual metaphors or erotic gestures. Inherent in this critique is the idea that devotion could never contain a sexual or erotic aspect and that these were corruptions of the original ideal, what she called the "true spirit"[35] of the dance. This applied further to the concept of the *navarasas*, which, for her, must also have been similarly "pure" and "devotional," devoid of sexual connotation. Her student, S. Sarada notes: "Rukmini Devi's dance repertoire was unique and varied ... She expressed the Sringara-Rasa—the emotion of love fully, but in its most refined form, without any trace of vulgarity."[36]

While Arundale and many practitioners, to this day, would see this edit to the repertoire as purely emancipatory to the dancer, there is still the complication regarding the audience. Dissolution of the patron and by extension, the patron's will, does not erase the implicit expectations that the incoming audience would carry. Here we are forced to contend with the logic of a "neoliberal" free market where individual choice and liberty reign supreme without critically acknowledging the hidden, decentralised yet strict

[33] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 93.
[34] Ibid., 92.
[35] Ibid., 91.
[36] Ibid.

expectations held by upper-class/caste audience members. Even where dance is public, free and supported through government funding or grants, the art continues to be tied to the will of a dominant few, represented by the intellectual class, the state or the wealthy elite.

This contradiction of bodily liberty in dance is easily seen when one considers that a dancer simply *cannot* perform an erotic version of Bharatanatyam, even if she wishes to do so. This calls into question the position of those principles that denied the presence of sexual and erotic material, as well as their motives and their effective dominance in the public space today, ranging across various aspects of social life. They further expand into sociological concepts of purity, and the dichotomy between the sacred and profane. It is this form of practice that we witness today in public performances of Bharatanatyam, where there is a general audience rather than one patron who is to be satisfied. However, not all non-hereditary dancers rallied behind Arundale, nor hereditary dancers behind Balasaraswati. A male non-hereditary dancer, Ram Gopal, who gained international fame, provided a different idea of tradition through temple sculpture: "I am going to follow the bronzes in the temple. I have a beautiful figure. Rukmini Devi used to say, "where do you get the ideas of dancing naked?" and I would say, "where did you get the idea of going inside the temple with your eyes closed? Look at those bronzes, Siva is almost naked."[37]

Conversely, a former devadasi, K. Bhanumati appreciated the new refashioning of the dance by Arundale, supported the reforms, and wholeheartedly sanctioned the new Bharatanatyam.[38] There was considerable variety in opinions, though it is clear which representation of dance gained dominance.

Incomplete Reform in the Political Sphere

Decades later, the work of Muthulakshmi Reddy pioneered legislative intervention in the lives of devadasis. Reddy was a revolutionary presence in the 20th century national movement, and was the first female doctor in her presidency, going on to implement a number of social health programmes that

[37] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 94.

[38] Ibid., 66.

focused on women. She was also part of the Madras Legislative Assembly and a prominent voice in the All India Women's Conference. However, it was her dual identity as the daughter of a Brahmin father and a devadasi mother which situated her uniquely within such activities, legitimising her 'interference.' In 1927, through a resolution, Reddy recommended that the government "undertake legislation to put a stop to the practice of dedication of young girls and young women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes" [39](a claim we have already explored), which was met with immediate protests from devadasis. The resolution would eventually take the form of a legal bill, implemented in 1947 and titled "Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947," criminalising the lifestyle of devadasis. Though the Act would eventually leave women from devadasi communities disenfranchised (in a number of ways), it is important to investigate the various stakeholders and motivations that led to the 1927 proposal, as well as the journey and implications of the 1947 implementation.

To begin with, Reddy's intervention was generally feminist in nature and centred on women across a number of social issues she raised her voice against–age of consent, female education, medical aid, etc. In fact, part of Reddy's initial suggestion (later modified) was the enfranchisement of women through *inams*—tax free lands on the basis of their association with temples to all devadasis—who would no longer be able to perform.[40] However, Reddy was not alone in such interventions and had to contend with her role within the Congress Party, as well as her association with the Theosophical Society headed by Annie Besant, the ideology of which would further influence Rukmini Devi Arundale in her refashioning of Bharatanatyam.

The idea of "pure virgins" residing in the temple and gaining education and training in religious and spiritual matters, an idea borrowed from the European concept of Catholic nuns, was transposed upon the devadasi.[41] Here, leaders like Besant and Reddy parrot Orientalist imaginations, as coined by Edward Said,[42] of a golden era. We witness the attempt to recreate a pure devadasi of ancient India, who is undeniably punctured with European

[39] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 121.

[40] Ibid., 149.

[41] Ibid., 122.

[42] Edward Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 162-206.

models of morality and chastity accorded to women. In their modern corruption, devadasis were fashioned as a caste for prostitutes and sanctioned by custom, and the public presence of young daughters of devadasis was protested. By letting the 'native opinion/feeling' take precedence, the government repeatedly emboldened voices who referred to devadasi daughters as 'wicked girls.' In reference to the admission of a devadasi girl to school, W. Robinson says "*A girl of this class, even before attaining the age of puberty, is a prostitute*."[43]

The question, therefore, centred on how such women were to be reformed and integrated. The resounding solution provided by the patriarchal, nationalist leadership was marriage. If devadasis were primarily identified through their non-conjugal relations, their depravity could only find solace in the institution of marriage (essentially conjugal monogamy). Though Reddy derides the necessity of marriage and its gendered inequality, the only alternative she is willing to approve of is celibacy. The only avenue, therefore, for devadasis to 'reclaim' their identities and be brought into a system defined through citizenship, awarding them rights, access to social programmes, etc. was to assimilate into the structure of the family.

Mahatma Gandhi embodied many such ideals, and his assessment of devadasis vehemently rejected their legitimacy, both in their lifestyle as well as their pleas. Gandhi viewed devadasis as leading a depraved and diseased existence, in need of "rehabilitation", and ignored their voices. Such opinions are remarkably consistent with his articulation of the role of women in the public sphere. Though often praised for making space for women in the national movement, he also maintained strict expectations, as Arundhati Roy explains: "Gandhi did indeed make the space for women to participate in the national movement. But those women had to be virtuous; they had to, so to speak, bear "marks" upon their person that would "sterilise the sinner's eye." They had to be obedient women who never challenged the traditional structures of patriarchy."[44]

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[43] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 118.

[44] See Arundhati Roy, *The Doctor and the Saint: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate: Caste, Race and Annihilation of Caste,* (Penguin Random House India, 2019), 64; and B. R. Ambedkar, Arundhati Roy, S. Anand, *The Annihilation Caste: The Critical Annotated Edition* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2014), 80-81.

His insistence upon maintaining a stringent definition of acceptable womanhood denied women their individuality and meant that the absorption of devadasis could never occur on their own terms. This was only possible within the status quo of the patriarchal family structure, which had yet to face a challenge. To be clear, not all reformists harped on marriage as a means of reform or emancipation. To E. V. Ramasamy, also known as Periyar, devadasis represented the prevalence of subjugation of lower-caste women at the hands and fancies of upper-caste men. More broadly the Self-Respect Movement sought to dispels concepts of *pativrata* (husband dedication) and *karpu* (chastity), which it perceived as implicit in the reproduction of caste purity.[45] Though he is unable to recognise the result of erasing the unique rights enjoyed by devadasis, he never upholds or celebrates the chastity of women, nor does he expect them to enter marriage as a fix.[46]

Abolitionist and anti-abolitionist views were held not only by political leaders, however, and devadasis also articulated their demands through petitions, letters, and organisations like the Madras Devadasi Association. They openly questioned the efficacy of the resolution, criticised the support of men from their own communities, and developed a language that placed them, their issues and identity within the political and religious milieu of the time. In a letter written by two devadasis, Duraikkannu and Parvati, they address and explain the religious sanctions provided to their practice. References to deities, tradition, and customs were made in an effort to appeal to the valorisation of the religious past of India, which was occurring throughout the early 20th century. It ends by questioning how the abolition of their practice could erase prostitution when the Indian Penal Code itself could not.[47]

Repeated attempts were made to harken back to the golden era of Hindu civilisation—drawing on Tamil epics like *Manimekalai*, devotional music, and religious legitimacy provided to their lifestyle—while simultaneously recognising the modern nature of the state they resided in. Reform for the devadasis was not limited to resisting abolition; it also aimed to couch itself in the sea of religious reform and revival taking place before independence was achieved in 1947. One plea requests the state to embrace the devadasis: "Give

[45] Karthick Ram Manoharan, "An Enduring Idea," *Frontline*, October 31, 2025, 14.
[46] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 140.
[47] Ibid., 126.

us education, religious, literary, and artistic. Education will dispel ignorance and we will occupy once again the same rank which we held in the national life of the past."[48]

The early 20th century political sphere witnessed the performance of the devadasi identity both on and off the stage. Along the lines of Anjali Arondekar's study, communities repeatedly engage in reimagining their histories under colonial oversight in the hopes of influencing policy which in the process alters the archive produced.[49] The articulation of these communities was restricted to the sensibilities of the era, negotiated by the political narratives that were emerging within the newly formed nation-state. Concepts of sexual freedom could never find utterance in an environment that demanded a specific femininity to survive the political onslaught represented by "reform."

The issue of 'reform' amongst sex workers continues to demand a similar representation of femininity, and criticises their existence as 'fallen' women. However, contemporary conversations around sex work are able to openly discuss their demands and question the assumptions held regarding sexual morality, equal access to sexuality, the relevance of family, and even theoretical frameworks like "*The Whore and the Madonna*." An excerpt from the *Sex Workers Manifesto* maintains delicate nuance, exploring a wide range of ideas to voice their demands and rights:

> The young men who look for sexual initiation, the married men who seek the company of 'other' women, the migrant labourers separated from their wives who try to find warmth and companionship in the red light area can not all be dismissed as wicked and perverted. To do that will amount to dismissing a whole history of human search for desire, intimacy and need. Such dismissal creates an unfulfilled demand for sexual pleasure, the burden of which though shared by men and women alike, ultimately weighs more heavily on women.[50]

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[48] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 125.

[49] Anjali Arondekar, *Abundance: Sexuality's History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 41.

[50] "Sex Workers' Manifesto: First National Conference of Sex Workers in India, 1997" *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* (DMSC), NSWP, accessed November 11, 2025,

In the end, devadasis were unable to convincingly define their existence within the patriarchal structure of colonial, and later, independent India. They were unable to maintain their lifestyles and, due to the non-conjugal nature of their relations, they were unable to claim hereditary property belonging to their partners or stand as equal heirs for the same. At the same time, men associated with the devadasi communities were able to develop different identities through their association with music and politics.[51] The unequal effects of "reform" for men and women of the same community, and the failures of this reform in the new nation, require nuanced analysis to understand the unique manner in which politicians, like former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi, and their caste identities were understood in society.

Recreating the Performance and Establishing the Archive

Another dimension that informed Rukmini Devi Arundale's new ideation was the historicity of this art. As mentioned above, for Arundale, Bharatanatyam was intrinsically tied to the Hindu temple–not just its geographical site, but its iconography, its religiosity, and its associations with caste as well. This harkening back to the past was not infrequent during the national movement, and periodisation posited many ancient Indian practices, values, cultures as the height of Indian civilisation.[52] In Arundale's conceptualisation, we see the crystallisation of not just community identity but the art form itself by way of relation. Though she repeatedly called for the revival of a "Golden Age" in dance, she also consciously made interpretations and additions. She "had to

https://www.nswp.org/resource/member-publications/sex-workers-manifesto-first-national-conference-sex-workers-india

[51] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, 145.

[52] This framework was not just limited to those who wished to foreground the Hindu or Aryan supremacy. E.g. *"Writing-in the latter half of the nineteenth century Phule argued that the original inhabitants of India were the Adivasis, among whom he included the Shudras, Ati Shudras and Dalits, all of whom were descendants of heroic peoples led by the Daitya king, Bali."* As is the same for theories which argue for Dravidian presence across the subcontinent, including Indus Valley Civilisation, before the coming of Aryans. – Romila Thapar, *Which Of Us Are Aryans?* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2019), 49.

try to make something new - not with the idea of making it look new, but with the idea of making it look old."[53]

The new Bharatanatyam costume was similarly made with influences from the Hindu temple, "in the spirit of what our people wore thousands of years ago."[54] What she may mean by "our people" is up for debate here, but it is clear that Rukmini Devi was conscious of her interpretive alteration without knowledge of what the original art form actually was. Thus, every new addition was not simply a change or innovation she proposed as an artist. Rather, it seemed to be a definition of what the art form supposedly was. This compromise is somewhat understandable, considering that performance is "ephemeral," and that it is impossible to accurately recreate the art as it was. Thus, "performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[55]

As Peggy Phelan outlines here, besides the performance itself, attempts to document and archive the form would fall short of the original. Though this strict classification of the ephemerality and its juxtaposition with the unchanging, static archive have been questioned by scholars as of late, it helps us identify the inherent ahistoric attempts to reliably recreate the choreography (and values, aesthetics, and philosophies) of ancient, or even early modern, forms of the dance. With no authoritative truth present, each change or alteration played a role in how the art form would be recognised in independent India in its capacity as an "unchanged and original" dance. Here, more than Devi's writings, philosophies, and values, her performance itself began to produce an archive of Bharatanatyam. It is, therefore, proposed that through her claim of precedence and association with the "true spirit" of the art at every turn, Devi aimed to produce a fresh archive; as Jacques Derrida

[53] Hari Krishnan, Davesh Soneji, Nrithya Pillai, "Caste, Class, Aesthetics, and the Making of Modern Bharatanatyam Dance," *Music and Dance as Everyday South Asia,* (2024): 209-228.

[54] Ibid., 219

[55] Laura Luise Schultz, "The Archive is Here and Now: Reframing Political Events as Theatre," in *Performing Archives–Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen, Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), 199-217.

puts it: "the first archivist establishes."[56] She says, "I had definitely decided that the dance was essentially spiritual and I **could not accept that which had gone away from the true spirit of Bharata Natyam**."[57] [emphasis added]

Rukmini Devi Arundale's project, though embroiled in the past, was essentially concerned with the future of the dance. Gaston articulates a widespread attitude towards this project at the time. It was felt that "though the art itself was admirable, it was in the wrong hands when dominated by a community tainted by the associations that surrounded the hereditary professionals."[58] As with colonial periodisation, formulation of frameworks related to the past aim to inform attitudes and tentative policies for the near future. This project, when extended to performance, accomplished the same effect as an archive. Derrida underlines how "one associates the archive with repetition, and repetition with the past. But it is the future that is at issue here, and the archive is an irreducible experience of the future."[59]

Though theory on performance studies and performance archives, especially dance, was generally written in the 20th century with respect to the rise of digital archives, some inferences are applicable to the manner in which Bharatanatyam was repackaged for its new audience. As Sarah Whatley, in her attempts to create a digital archive of dance, notes: "Perhaps because the creation of digital dance archives is a relatively new phenomenon, archival practices are now intervening in the processes of dance creation and reception rather than always following after the dance is over."[60] Of course, considerations of the audience are always an intrinsic part of how a performance is conceived and showcased, but here we may note the intervention of the archive itself in the performance-making practice. Display

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[56] Jacques Derrida. *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*, Trans. by Eric Prenowitz (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 55.

[57] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam,* 91.

[58] E. Krishna Iyer writes, in the context of a Brahmin couple being trained: "For once in his life he [P.S. Minakshisundaram] has been fortunate in entrusting his art in the hands of a proper and intelligent couple. Their charm, chasteness and dignity remind us of the spiritual associations."

[59] Derrida, *Archive Fever,* 68.

[60] Sarah Whatley, "Dance Encounters Online: Digital Archives and Performance" in *Performing Archives–Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen, Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), 163-178

of *sringara rasa* was not just left out of non-hereditary dance repertoires as a matter of taste and values; it was also established that hereditary dancers simply had a natural calling to it, which they themselves lacked. P. S. Minakshisundaram, a hereditary dance teacher, when tasked with training a Brahmin dance couple (U. S. Krishna Rao and Chandrabhaga Devi), resorted to teaching a different repertoire, one which was considered more "acceptable," keeping in mind their persons.

In the 1940s, Minakshisundaram mentions, "*I have not taught you what I teach to the devadasis*." He continued, "*This Bharata Natyam must spread all over the world and bring glory to our motherland.*"[61] It is clear that in the process of its reconfiguration, Bharatanatyam was seen as an opportunity to showcase the new art form as a defining marker of Indian culture to a global audience when taught to dancers of higher social status. This expectation was inherent during the training (hence before being performed), which altered not just choreographies but lyrics as well, in the interest of being received well abroad as the image of a new nation. Exaggerations or 'purification' of the repertoire were carried out to accommodate popular sensibilities as well as a new projection of the self. The new imagination of Bharatanatyam was directed towards a different audience, one quite distinct from that which the devadasis had catered to.

In 2009-10, Tracy C. Davis and Barnaby King attempted to recreate Charles Matthew's *Trip to America* - a solo performance, from textual sources and illustrations in order to understand the content and intentions of his work.[62] They faced a number of challenges in attempting to recreate movement, vocal specifics, prop usage, and transitions, often having to resort to inventing new material altogether. Similar to oral histories that are reproduced over time and intimately altered through each reproduction, the ephemerality of dance denies us any true claim over the original. Allegedly racist representations in Matthew's work were re-evaluated, keeping in mind the social milieu he

[61] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam,* 91. [It was Rao himself who noted these last words of his master.]

[62] Tracy C. Davis, Barnaby King, "Performance, Again: Resuscitating the Repertoire" in *Performing Archives–Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen, Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), 179-198.

belonged to, and whether his performances were indeed 'interpretable' as racist to their audience.

Later, the team worried whether their performance could "offend contemporary ethical sensibilities if performed uncritically." On the other hand, they also note that "toning down 1820s fun to meet modern standards would potentially misrepresent historical evidence," thus illustrating a major dilemma. They outline some of the shortcomings, as well as concerns, that one must contend with in attempting to comprehend a performance which has passed, such as "the movement between historiographic inquiry and performance ethnography as sometimes distinct and sometimes convergent methodologies, awkwardly introducing ethical questions of representation on top of the problems of historical accuracy."[63]

Here, Bharatanatyam must contend with its eroticism being discarded as a matter of conscious pruning. If so, then it classifies itself as explicitly ahistorical and 'non-untouched,' since *sringara rasa* is taken to be essential to the art. In addition, the very identity of the dance itself was changed, as hereditary dancers now constitute a minority of those performing today. To be sure, the devadasis, along with other kinds of artists, represented an alternate vision of the art form, one which had evolved over centuries but made no claim of being 'original' or unchanged. Contrary to popular belief, there was indeed a period of transition, from devadasi's dance as it had been to the Bharatanatyam that is widely practised today. T. Balasaraswati herself performed from 1925 to 1984,[64] presumably in her own interpretation, and discussions and contentions surrounding the 'revival' of Bharatanatyam continued at least until 1985.

Challenges and Alternatives to the Archive

Devadasis like Balasaraswati were not the only ones to challenge Bharatanatyam's new repertoire. Various other dancers, such as Ram Gopal discussed above, presented arguments against Rukmini Devi's conception, despite being a non-hereditary dancer himself. While the presence of artistic interpretation is hardly surprising, what stands out is just how widely known

[63] Ibid., 180.

[64] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam,* 90.

these dancers were on an international scale. Ram Gopal, and before him Uday Shankar, were based in Europe and were often placed beside prominent Western artists as equals.[65] The concern shown before for international audiences by Rao, for which the repertoire was so consciously edited, doesn't seem to be visible here in the same capacity. These dancers though, ever so prominent, did not align with the other strains of dance which would come to take hold in India in the coming years.

Chandralekha is another prominent dancer who attempted to reformulate the dance. Her work does not directly converse with the issue of devadasis, or with Arundale, but makes use of a number of philosophical and historical influences to attempt a re-imagining of the dance. She is documented in much more detail through her performances, documentaries, videos of performances, and discussions on her process and inspirations. Her documentary "*Sharira – Chandralekha's Explorations in Dance*" was made with Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) and aired on Doordarshan,[66] suggesting some level of acceptance or, at the very least, indifference towards her interpretation within society and state.She is associated with both Bharatanatyam, in which she was originally trained, as well as contemporary dance, for which she is better known.[67] Her position is occasionally interpreted as a 'break' with tradition or the traditional repertoire, placing her in the camp which claims that "Bharatanatyam in its present form is no longer relevant to modern Indian society."[68] However, Chandralekha exhibits yet another claim to dance and performance history and is better defined as someone in conversation with tradition, rather than one who rejects it in an outright fashion. Overall, her work can be categorised as reinterpretations and reimagining of not just choreography or repertoire but performance, movement, and the body itself. Many of her pieces are based on the experiences of women within patriarchal systems, but beyond the content of the dance, the philosophy informing it draws heavily from aesthetics and knowledge systems of India. Her centrality of the body is derived from ancient

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[65] Ibid., 81.

[66] *"Sharira – Chandralekha's Explorations in Dance," directed by Ein Lall,* PSBT India, 2003, video, 29:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyXh_5dT0zw.

[67] Ananya Chatterjea, "Chandralekha: Negotiating the Female Body and Movement in Cultural/Political Signification," *Dance Research Journal* 30 no.1 (1998): 25-33.

[68] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam*, 99.

texts, where she contests pre-existing readings to reclaim a meaning that was supposedly always present. To her, the Vedas "had always known about the body as the starting point of life" and the *Natyashastra* was "a very modern text"[69] for its centralisation of the body. She further draws extensively on Tantra philosophy, Yoga, and Chakras, yet avoids delving into divine associations, keeping her reasoning well-understood and legible, even if not agreeable. Chatterjea locates her attempts within a "resistive postmodernism," one which "is concerned with critical deconstruction of tradition," and unconcerned with locating a singular truth but rather imaginatively exploring history through the lens of the body.[70]

It should be kept in mind that the character of Chandralekha's work was not arrived at only through literature; it is as much practically realised as it is literarily. For example, she is known to revisit traditional concepts like the nayika (the traditional heroine), *saustabha* (purity of line), and eye gestures such as *sachi* (sideways glance) in her own manner.[71] However, it is the texts that allow us to examine the historical associations her dance exhibits without divine or mystic associations that have the potential to shroud the origins of her work. The archive on Chandralekha's dance, as well as the philosophy which informs it, gives a deeper look into her decisions of inclusion and exclusion within her performance.

Contemporary Presence of Bharatanatyam

The 20th century re-creation of devadasi dance led to a change in the demographic that was expected to perform. Bharatanatyam was formulated as part of a larger mission of nation-building, and eventually, 'nonhereditary' Brahmin women came to primarily practice the art, serving as its patrons, instead of temples or courts. McCann notes that ballet, a form which had inspired Arundale, had similarly become a marker of middle-class status in Europe and North America. Both Bharatnatyam and ballet constituted the highest form of classical art in their respective societies and were considered appropriate and sophisticated pursuits for daughters of middle-class

[69] Chatterjea, *"Chandralekha,"* 392.
[70] Ibid., 393.
[71] Ibid.

families.[72] Both were patronised by the elite and government-led institutions, and performed free of charge in public venues after years of training. This new form of the dance was brought out of the spheres of the state and the temple, by way of its new performers—caste Hindus—ultimately transforming its meaning and function. Dance, specifically Bharatanatyam, had been reconstituted into an activity performed primarily by upper/middle class women as a hobby rather than a professional undertaking. Kalakshetra, founded in 1936, which gained recognition from the Parliament in 1993 as an "Institute of National Importance"[73] and support from the Ministry of Culture, came to provide a holistic and gendered education rather than the training required to pursue the art; one in which "young women emerging from Kalakshetra were meant to be attractive, trained in the ethos and habitus of upper-class life, signalling middle-class housewifely respectability."[74]

By exchanging the barriers of entry and the very definition of dance" in the public eye, Bharatanatyam has redefined the art as one belonging to the private sphere. The express goal of the reform, in fact, had been to split the devadasi from temple institutions and define her through individual citizenship in the new nation.[75] Previous hereditary restrictions which defined inculcation, training, and performance were dissolved, and today "anyone" can perform or teach Bharatanatyam. However, this participation still hinges on the socio-economic status of the individual. As Gaston states, "This profession, which was once defined by community association, is now based on economics. There is no central professional body which confers on an individual the right to perform or teach dance."[76] Therefore, the 'release' of Bharatanatyam from the confines of the temple, rests on the same arguments as the laissez-faire, free-market economy, which claims to provide free access

[72] McCann, "Performing Gender, Class and Nation," 69.

[73] Kalakshetra, *Kalakshetra Brochure* (Chennai: Kalakshetra Foundation, 2020) accessed December 30, 2025, https://kalkbuckmedi21.s3.ap-south-1.amazonaws.com/pdf/tour/KF-Brochure-Apr-2020.pdf.

[74] McCann, "Performing Gender, Class and Nation," 73.

[75] "*The Heavens would not fall and morality would in no way be jeopardised, if one or two cases of very good art is reluctantly tolerated in exceptional instances without the associated vice-as a matter of temporary evil necessary, pending the coming up of better persons*" Krishna Iyer regarding the participation of devadasi women and subsequent introduction of caste elites into the art form. see E. Krishna Iyer, "A Reply to Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy," Madras Mail, December 17, 1932.

[76] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam,* 61.

but is ultimately defined by unacknowledged pre-existing conditions like economic status. This barrier to access is one of the primary issues regarding disenfranchisement, and conveniently chooses to disregard the implications of dance as an art form existing within the modern, capitalist nation-state.

While the contemporary Bharatanatyam dancer does not need to attract patrons, one is still required to attract patronage—be that through invitation to perform, grants, government sponsorships, etc. Today, there are only a few professionals who are able to support themselves solely through dance. Dancers must, therefore, maintain other sources of income to continue dancing; in fact, this part-time circumstance of dancers is pointed out as a display of dedication to the art and the larger values of the individual.

Beyond the professional sphere, however, dance also exists as a way of socialisation and education of young girls in Hindu mythology, on which performances are generally based, and in "traditional social values." The sites where Bharatanatyam is performed also outline its function—as a "transnational literacy tool"[77] in international and diasporic circuits or as personal, artistic endeavours limited to elite cultural organisations like 'sabhas' in cities. By the 1980s, there were references to husbands who sought this association with dance and wished to have a link with this "glamorous way of life," and supposedly made these women "candidates for sophisticated society."[78] All this culminates within Bharatanatyam itself, often existing as a social accomplishment rather than a profession. Indeed, studies have traced parallels between the *arangetram*, the first solo debut performance of a dancer, and Brahmin coming-of-age ceremonies. Gaston notes how videos of *arangetrams* are often shown to marriage prospects.[79]

In some ways, Bharatnatyam continues to maintain the centrality of the performer—now simply occupied by upper-caste, non-hereditary women who were able to perform freely without sacrificing "honour." Women from hereditary families continue to perform, however small in number, embodying the political implication of their existence within the art form.

[77] Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar, "Bharatanatyam and Transnational Literacy through Socio-Cultural Pedagogy," *Journal of Humanities And Social Science* 19, no. 10 (2014): 50-59.

[78] Gaston, *Bharata Natyam,* 72.

[79] McCann, "Performing Gender, Class, and Nation," 72.

Nrithya Pillai for example states: "To my mind, my very presence, my body, my aesthetics, and my reclamation of who I am question and complicate this "clean" history of Bharatanatyam."[80] We see here that even without the existence of the devadasi community—which unabashedly expressed erotic desire, matriliny, and non-conjugal relationships—the individual, be it through lineage, identity, or ideology can maintain a critical lens. In line with this, McCann describes in her study the experience of a young dancer from Los Angeles and her dissonance between the art she performed and the life she lived. She adds, "the panellist was particularly uncomfortable with being expected to depict coy maidens and pining heroines, roles she felt did not relate to her lived reality as a modern woman."[81]

Similarly, contemporary productions of Bharatanatyam occasionally explore innovative, modern feminist themes of resistance and violence, as seen in *Our Voice* presented by Natya Vriksha Dance Collective.[82] *And She Spok*e, directed by Vaibhav Arekar and Sushant Jadhav, explores the lives of "ordinary, contemporary women" and centres on forms of storytelling that break free from the conventional repertoire.[83] Rama Vaidyanathan's piece Shaktya, portrays women "who altered the course of history"[84] and "manifested the presence of the Goddess."[85] The Spanda Dance Company performs abstract and symbolic group choreographies "…without the need to convert all story-telling into a male-female construct and breaking from the frontal, made-for-the-proscenium stage presentations…" while still retaining the 'vocabulary' of Bharatanatyam.[86] Even performances based on older, traditional

[80] Pillai, "Caste, Class, Aesthetics," 209.

[81] McCann, "Performing Gender, Class, and Nation," 61S.

[82] Sachitra Kalra, "Bharatanatyam dancer Geeta Chandran presents Our Voice in New Delhi," Hindustan Times, October 8, 2024, https://www.hindustantimes.com/htcity/htcity-delhi-junction/bharatanatyam-dancer-geeta-chandran-presents-our-voice-in-new-delhi-101728375954268.html.

[83] Yadavi Shakdher Menon, "Report – 'And She Spoke' *Narthaki*, July 10, 2024, https://narthaki.com/info/rev24/rev3159.html.

[84] Anita Vallabh, "Indo-American Arts Council's Erasing Borders Dance Festival 2025," *Narthaki*, September 27, 2025, https://narthaki.com/info/rev25/rev3497.html.

[85] Rama Vaidyanathan (@ramavaidyanathan), "Shaktya Performance Announcement," Instagram photo, September 26, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DPDWXDlja9w/?hl=en&img_index=3.

[86] Spanda Dance Company, *"Dance Compositions,"* accessed December 30, 2025, https://spandadance.com/dance-compositions.php

choreographies and Puranic myths are navigated by the performer's choice in picking pieces which foreground women, their desire, sexuality and are often critical of patriarchal, orthodox assumptions.

Rukmini Devi Arundale's conception of Bharatanatyam was not isolated from the histories and even performative aesthetics which defined dance for the devadasis. Her presence as a performer, in her body, gender, class, and caste determined not only which concepts would be integrated into her new repertoire, but also the movements she would be willing to perform. Arundale's choices had long been controversial, and when inquired upon why she excluded the erotic elements from her dance, she answered as follows:

> You **don't merely teach with what you know, but you also teach with what you are**… She wants to know when I said that certain aspects of sringara rasa (the aesthetic expression of erotic love) should not be danced to… She says, "can't it be done with dignity and grace?" Of course it can be done… **I don't say that for a person like her, she may be able to make it so delicate**… she is accustomed to doing it in a particular way. But ... for me, it's a temperamental difference. **I would not be able to do it**.[87] [emphasis added]

As Hari Krishnan and Davesh Soneji put it, "Arundale's body just cannot bring itself to do what the courtesan's body did," as she maintains that one "teaches with what you are."[88] The performer is not simply a result of the music, lyric, and choreography but is continually redefined through their body and social status, which are ever-subject to change as we have observed.

Conclusion

The journey of the devadasi across colonial India and into the independent state bears the common fact of an abundance of written material, as is the case with many colonial subjects and concepts. The written archive is rich in investigations into the lives of devadasis, and debates and discussions surrounding the draft legislation are well documented and remain available

[87] Krishnan, Soneji, and Pillai, "Caste, Class, Aesthetics, and the Making of Modern Bharatanatyam Dance." 222.

[88] Ibid.

for research to this day. However, performance archives represent the past in a different manner, stimulating a unique interpretation of their material. Through musical tradition and influence, lyric and literary forms, aesthetic considerations, and professional obligations, we uncover new relations and influences which moulded the art form. Through the 'revival' of what we know as Bharatanatyam today, we further investigate the implications of altering, eschewing, and reforming an art form by way of its relationship to particular communities, its repute, and its value as seen and understood by various stakeholders. The ephemerality of performance is repeatedly unsettled by the presence of the archive, yet at the same time, the existing material also makes clear the fallacy of a true 'revival,' along with its subsequent shortcomings and inaccuracies.

Today, the history of the devadasi is constantly referenced by hereditary and non-hereditary dancers alike. It is clear that we have yet to establish a concrete, uniform, and satisfactory repertoire, and the presence of hereditary dancers repeatedly disturbs the 'reformed' art form. While contemporary attempts at developing and 'progressing' the art form look towards making the art applicable to present circumstances of womanhood, sexuality, desire, and sexual violence, another strand continues to question and criticise the reform and 'democratisation' that took place in the 20th century (not to suggest they are mutually exclusive). As Nrithya Pillai points out:

> If reform and reinvention were supposed to be about the democratization of the art, show us women from hereditary and other oppressed communities who are now successful performers?... it is obvious that the first step in decolonizing must be an attempt to repopulate the dance community with dancers from other castes....[89]

The archive, therefore, eschews not just performance aspects and interpretations, but indeed communities of people themselves. The performance cannot be separated from the fact of the body, where it lies and what it proclaims. At the same time, attempts made by various dancers, academics, teachers aim to include and broaden the scope for the art form. Nrithya Pillai, a hereditary dancer, singer, writer; Swarnamalya Ganesh, a

[89] The Swaddle, "Tell Me More."

dancer-historian[90]; and Narthaki Nataraj,[91] a dancer who proudly displays their transgender identity, are just a few of the dancers who represent this long-standing effort. Performance, viewed through its dance and music repertoire, may form a concrete archive similar to conventional written sources. However, as demonstrated here, *performance archives* through the body and its memory, positioning archiving as an embodied practice rather than a textual one. They provide an opportunity to reassess interests amongst communities once thought to be lost. Their contemporary existence can be investigated through historical developments, while acknowledging their unique circumstances. There are some developments with regard to this, especially legislations like the Karnataka Devadasi (Prevention, Prohibition, Relief and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2025, which aims to replace the earlier Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition and Dedication) Act, 1982. The new Act gives freedom to omit the father's name in government documents, as well as recognition of the father, (potentially) through DNA testing,[92] providing relief to the community.

We can see that the devadasi is scarcely outside the public's imagination, and continues to find mention even in legislation. On one hand political, social, and economic relief will allow the community to voice its own interests on its own terms. On the other hand, analyses of performance, in addition to the archive being formulated, aim to illuminate the circumstances of their disenfranchisement and investigate the intimate and 'seamless' conversation between history and how communities imagine themselves and their art. If accurate reconstruction of performances past is impossible, then what are the shortcomings of doing so, and furthermore, what are the nuances of imaginatively reconstructing performance? What are the claims involved in each, of truth and imagined tradition, what purposes do they serve, and how

[90] Anuradha Vellat, "'Bharatanatyam is an inherently inclusive art': Swarnamalya Ganesh," *The Hindu*, May 5, 2016, https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/bharatanatyam-is-an-inherently-inclusive-art-swarnamalya-ganesh/article8561657.ece.

[91] Sudarshan Ramabadran, "Dr Narthaki Nataraj; India's transgender icon and soft power ambassador," *Times of India.* ttps://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/the-vantage-viewpoint/dr-narthaki-nataraj-indias-transgender-icon-and-soft-power-ambassador/.

[92] The Hindu Bureau, "Cabinet Clears Karnataka Devadasi Bill for Rehabilitation, 17 Other Legislations." *The Hindu*, www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/cabinet-clears-karnataka-devadasi-bill-for-rehabilitation-17-other-legislations/article69905610.ece

can recognition of the impossibility of recreation inform future endeavours? Consequently, how can acknowledgement of the performance of identities often for the purposes of the archive, to attract intervention, provide clarity to their unique interests?[93] Interrogating these subtractions and re-inviting excluded influences through this critique foregrounds larger questions of access in the contemporary dance space. Here, the venues, the audiences, the economic structures, and social expectations all construct unique caste and class barriers where only a few bodies are invited to perform, where, even after induction, further expectations are placed upon their bodies.

In conclusion, an effort to historically analyse the presence and absence of aspects of performance reveals much about the performers themselves—about where they stand today and what they stood to gain through developments which are more recent than we often assume. Theoretical considerations, such as the impossibility of fully recovering the past nature of artworks, are not too dissimilar from concerns raised by historian Keith Jenkins about the inherent variability of sources[94]—save for the invitation of performance as a valid source, along with its nuances and challenges. Practical analyses[95] aid and further strengthen these arguments about how archives record, remember, and reconstruct the past, shaping our perceptions, prejudices, and performances going forward.

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[93] Arondekar, "Abundance," 41.

[94] Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking history* (London: Routledge, 1991), 14.

[95] Such as PaR - Performance as Research. "Approaches like Performance as Research (PaR) further integrate the creation of a performance into the 'scholarly process' thus activating "a mutual response between doing and knowing in the scholarly process." See, Davis, and King, "Performance, Again."

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Archival Practice in India through the Lens of Contemporary History Writing

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

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

Introduction

Archives are institutions where old government and non-government documents are preserved for administrative use and academic research. Almost every country has its own national archive, which is also considered an integral part of cultural memory and heritage. In India, the National Archives of India[1] (NAI) has a long tradition of safeguarding important and

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

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

Officially, the systematic initiation of modern archives in India goes back to British rule, when the Imperial Record Office was established in Calcutta in 1891.[3] However, this does not mean that there was no tradition of keeping archives or documents in ancient and medieval times. The Mughal Empire was also known as the "paper state" because of the abundantly preserved documents and bureaucratic records.[4] Similarly, in ancient times, inscriptions carved on stones, rocks, caves, and copper plates served as valuable sources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[12] Ibid., 11-12.

[13] "Section 12(2)," The Public Records Act, 1993.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[16] Ibid.

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

[18] "Orientation Course for Records Management for Records Officers," National Archives of India, accessed September 12, 2025, https://nationala rchives.nic.in/record-

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

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

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

management/records-management-rm/orientation-course-records-management-records-officers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[24] Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

[27] Nite, "Archives, Being and Representation," 575-577.

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

Critiquing the National Archives

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

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

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

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

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

However, my satisfaction rapidly transformed into dismay upon examining the files mentioned in the above table, as I found that much of the metadata was erroneous. As an archivist, one can easily determine the year of a file merely by seeing its file number.[30] For instance, when I view a file that appears to belong to 1978, in reality, that file belongs to 1954.[31] I inspected numerous files and noted that the years indicated in the portal were predominantly inaccurate. The person responsible for collating the metadata had filled in the appraisal year of the file incorrectly; the opening years of the files should have been mentioned there. This is reflective of the negligence of the National Archives authority. Regular appraisal is an essential part of the files in the DRR, and after the appraisal, the year of appraisal and signature of the officer are mentioned at the bottom of the file. The table presented above shows that an adequate collection of files is available, but in reality, the years were wrongly mentioned in the metadata.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Filling the Gaps: Contributions of Private Archives

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this context, Dr Subhinith Kaushik, a historian, expressed his displeasure in an article published in *The Wire*. The article, titled "शोधार्थी से ऊंची रक़म वसूलता अभिलेखागार: अशोका यूनिवर्सिटी पर चंद सवाल"[33] ("Archives Charging High Fees from Researchers: A Few Questions on Ashoka University"), was later removed from the *The Wire* website. In his article, he argued that researchers from the weaker and marginalised backgrounds, as well as general public and common students, would have to pay a significant amount to study the documents of Agyeya. He further noted that if Agyeya's documents had been deposited in the PMML, they would have been accessible to all researchers at a much lower cost. However, I was partially convinced by Dr Kaushik's argument, because the PMML is an autonomous institute and also charges compulsory membership fees that are almost equal to those of the ACI. However, the reprographics[34] charges differ significantly (see Table 2).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2: Comparative Overview of Membership Fees and Other Charges[38]

Institutions	**Membership fee for Indian Scholars**	**Reprographics charges for Indian Scholars**
National Archives of India	Free for all, digital records can be accessed without additional costs; payment required for downloads.	Downloading of digital Image: ● 0-20 images- free of cost ● 20-50 images- ₹2 per image ● 50-100 images- ₹3 per image ● 100-above- ₹5 per image Physical Printout: ● ₹2 per copy, and for ● Colour prints, ₹8 per copy Scholars can use cameras to click pictures of documents free of charge.
Department of Delhi Archives	Aadhar required for online registration; documents can be accessed digitally, free of cost.	Earlier, the charges were ₹3 per page for photocopies, and researchers could also take digital copies using their own camera by paying ₹3 per image. After the digitisation of records, the cost has increased significantly; ₹20 for downloading a single page.

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

Prime Minister Museum and Library	Catalogue is available online, but to access and read the records, membership is mandatory: ● Up to one week: ₹200 ● Up to one month ₹500 ● Up to one year: ₹1,000	The charges for xeroxing/scanning for Indian Scholars are ₹ 5 per page/ document; for foreign scholars, ₹10 per page/document. Photograph charges for one digital photo of 600 dpi is ₹200 per photo. Copyright charges for single photograph is ₹1,000.
Archives of Contemporary India, Ashoka University	Catalogue is available online, but to access the records, membership is required. ● One day ₹200 ● One month ₹400 ● Six months ₹1,000 ● One year ₹1,500	Duplication/scanning (A1–A4 pages): ₹10 per page (extra for pen drive as per GB). Photographs/Images: ● 300 dpi: ₹200 per photo + pen drive charges ● 600 dpi: ₹400 per photo + pen drive charges

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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Voices of Resistance: Peacebuilding Efforts by the Women in the Left Movement during Militancy in Punjab

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This paper examines the role of women's activism in the Punjab Istree Sabha (PIS) – a Left-leaning movement in Punjab - during the decade of militancy (1980s–early 1990s). The research utilises oral history and archives, including newspaper articles, interviews, and reports, to explore how women resisted violence, mobilised communities, and employed cultural and religious idioms to promote peace. The study reveals how PIS used strategies such as theatre, scripture-based messaging for peacebuilding, political resistance and grassroots relief work. The paper offers insights into gendered forms of activism and the significance of women's agency in conflict transformation.

Keywords: Punjab militancy, Resistance, Women's activism, Left movement, Punjab Istree Sabha

Introduction

The decade of militancy in Punjab, spanning from 1980 to the early 1990s, remains one of the most violent and polarising chapters of Independent India. The Khalistan movement was demanding a separate Sikh homeland. This movement rapidly escalated into armed conflict, resulting in over 25,000 deaths.[1] The Operation Blue Star in June 1984 was a watershed moment, not only in the history of Punjab, but the entire country. The desecration of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army, coupled with the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to avenge the desecration of their holiest shrine and the subsequent anti-Sikh pogroms, entrenched cycles of fear, resentment, and violence across Punjab.

[1] Kristina Roessler Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 16, no. 2 (2009): 975.

Scholarship on this period often emphasises state repression, militant mobilisation, and diaspora networks. However, counter-movements that resisted both communalism and authoritarianism have received limited attention. Among these, the role played by the Punjab Istree Sabha (PIS), a women's organisation affiliated with the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW),[2] is particularly significant and remains largely unexplored. PIS used both communist principles and teachings from Sikh traditions to mobilise women, organise protests, provide relief, and disseminate messages of peace and communal harmony.

The involvement of PIS demonstrates how women, often positioned as the worst sufferers of conflict, also acted as active agents of resistance. Through protests, relief work, cultural interventions, and strategies rooted in both Marxist and Sikh egalitarian ideals, PIS members emphasised alternative visions of peace and justice. They confronted militants in public, risking their own lives offered solidarity to bereaved families, collaborated with artists and writers, and established institutional mechanisms like the Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust (PISRT) to support victims of militancy as well as police excesses in Punjab. This paper seeks to document and analyse these contributions, drawing upon archival records, oral histories, and cultural texts. By situating PIS within the broader framework of women's political activism and resistance, the study highlights how gendered forms of agency provide a more nuanced approach to an otherwise dominant understanding of militancy and its aftermath in Punjab.

Methodology

The details of the significant work undertaken by the women from PIS have not been documented or researched. Few historical accounts, even those of the women's movement in the country, capture the history of women in the communist movement in organising working-class women.[3] Consequently,

[2] The National Federation of Indian Women is a women's organisation in India, the women's wing of the Communist Party of India.

[3] Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (London: Routledge, 2018); Parvathi Menon, "Breaking Barriers: Official Life Histories of Communist Women Leaders," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 43 (2005): 4601–4609.

this research relies primarily on archival sources and oral history interviews as its key methodologies.

The primary materials include regional newspaper articles, NFIW publications, conference proceedings, and oral history interviews of women leaders accessed from the archives of Nehru Memorial Library. Interviews were conducted with women who were involved in the PIS during the militancy period. Songs and poems form a rich source of insight into the sociocultural context of the time. Although many were never formally documented, they survive in the memories of those who experienced that era. Many of these slogans and protest songs were composed and sung by women during the militancy. Kannabiran et al posit that, these stories and songs that resist power structures, and describe incidents of fighting against injustice, are ways for women to communicate those "stories that never saw the light of the more public modes of patriarchal cultures".[4] Since these stories have been marginalised in the written culture traditionally, oral history becomes very relevant. Documenting these rich traditions is of crucial importance as it brings those aspects of history into light which are otherwise in danger of being "condemned to historical silence by archival absence".[5]

An overview of the militancy in Punjab

From 1980 to 1992, the state of Punjab was "riven by an internecine, anti-state conflict involving a movement to establish a separate independent Sikh state of Khalistan. It is estimated that upward of 25,000 people were killed in this time period, the majority of whom, despite the communal rhetoric of the movement, were Sikhs".[6] A lot of research has been done to delve deeper into the historical, political, social, and cultural factors that were instrumental in causing strife in the state of Punjab.[7] The moment of rupture was Operation

[4] Vasantha Kannabiran et al., *"We Were Making History": Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle* (Hyderabad: Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1993), 28.

[5] Janaki Nair, *The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61.

[6] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement," 975.

[7] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Harjot Singh Oberoi, *From Punjab to Khalistan: Territoriality and Metacommentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985).

Blue Star, in which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave orders to the Indian army to march inside the Golden Temple to oust the militants and their leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, who had been residing there for months. Curfew was imposed in Amritsar, and the public awaited with trepidation what would follow. Soon after, the army entered the Golden Temple, where Bhindranwale was housed. Some 40 other shrines (gurdwaras) were attacked by the Army, where militants were suspected to be hiding.[8] This included shrines in Patiala, Tarn Taran, and Moga.[9] The siege of the Golden Temple lasted until 6 June. These dates were controversial since 5 June is Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom day, and many devotees were flocking to the Golden Temple at that time. The siege, apart from the death of Bhindranwale and his followers, also led to the demise of many innocent civilians as well as army officials.

The incident shook the people of Punjab. Until Operation Blue Star, Sikhs had mixed opinions about Khalistan or the demands made by Bhindranwale. But the desecration of their holiest shrine did not sit well with the Sikh community. Tully & Jacob argue that one of the most controversial incidents of the entire operation was the burning of the Golden Temple Library, which housed invaluable manuscripts, including copies of the Guru Granth Sahib handwritten by some of the Gurus.[10] The Sikhs went into a state of unrest. Many resignations from official posts were tendered. There were rebellions by the Sikh army officials in their battalions in several regions across the country. The soldiers who had occupied the Golden Temple reportedly smoked and consumed alcohol within the complex, thereby disrespecting the ritual customs of the shrine, which created further antagonism among the people.[11] The police also committed a lot of human rights violations in the state, in the name of curbing militant activities.[12]

Militant activities continued in Punjab unabashedly despite the death of their leader, Bhindranwale. On 31 October 1984, the Indian Prime Minister, Indira

[8] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2004.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 1985.

[11] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2004.

[12] Amnesty International, *India: Break the Cycle of Impunity and Torture in Punjab* (London: Amnesty International, 2003).

Gandhi, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards at her residence. The incident shook the entire country. As a result of this act, a pogrom[13] against Sikhs was launched in New Delhi, with its repercussions seen across the country. It led to the death of thousands of people in a span of two to three days.[14]

In 1986, the formal call for Khalistan gained renewed momentum within Punjab and across the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. These organisations collected money to help procure arms and ammunition for the militant outfits in Punjab.[15] Through the draconian use of power by the state, militancy was finally curbed by the year 1992. However, it left an indelible mark on the history of Punjab and its people. Counterinsurgency operations resulted in widespread violence, with several thousand losing their lives, and excesses committed by both the militants and the police. Reports by Amnesty International (2003) and Human Rights Watch (2007) document human rights excesses, including extrajudicial killings and disappearances of thousands of men. These operations were most common in the border districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Ferozepur.[16] This period was marked with pervasive violence and fear as people suffered at the hands of militancy as well as the police-led counterinsurgency movements of the state. However, many movements and individuals continued to work towards unity and peace in the state and helped those who were in need. The genesis of PIS can be traced to pre-independence Punjab, during the independence struggle.[17] It was also one of the first organisations in Punjab to initiate work

[13] A violent riot against the people and property of a religious, racial or national minority.

[14] Tully & Jacob note that "The government itself admits that throughout India more than 2,717 people were killed in the anti-Sikh riots. Almost all of them were Sikhs. Some 2,150 died in Delhi. According to official estimates, 50,000 Sikhs fled from the capital of their country to Punjab for safety. Another 50,000 took refuge in special camps set up by the government and voluntary organisations." Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar*, 7.

[15] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2004.

[16] Amnesty International, *India: Break the Cycle of Impunity and Torture in Punjab*, 2003; Human Rights Watch, *Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2007).

[17] See Aastha Dang, "Were the 1950s–70s Really the 'Dead Decades' of the Indian Women's Movement? Understanding the Work of Punjab Istree Sabha through an Alternate History Perspective," *Research Journal (Arts)* 21.

against militancy and coordinate relief work for the families who had suffered due to it.

Role played by the Punjab Istree Sabha during the militancy

Vimla Dang (the then president of PIS and founding member of NFIW) and her fellow members realised that when a society suffers from militancy or any violent activities, it is the women who are the worst sufferers. Examples from across the world are proof of this. Anderlini says that in times of war and strife, women are among the first to speak out collectively against it to prevent things from going out of hand. This is also because women are aware of the cost they and their families have to pay for the war and the crisis it entails.[18] Thus, women employ non-violent strategies to advocate for peace. Women often establish independent organisations to strengthen such efforts, creating spaces that reflect their own ideals and strategies, distinct from those shaped under male leadership.[19]

These aspects were seen in the case of Punjab during militancy as well. Glimpses of some of these efforts by women were found in the NFIW conference proceedings and publications. For instance, the NFIW (1986) highlights the role of women in fighting communalism. The editorial refers to the demand of Khalistan among other such issues, and says,

> Today, women of all communities are equally victims of various aspects of religious fundamentalism. The propagandists of this ideology claim roots in old cultural traditions and religious practices. By misquoting the scripture or quoting them out of context, they deny women the right to equality, dignity, and freedom, which they have won after hard struggles for several centuries.[20]

Thus, it is important to view the efforts of PIS in strife-torn Punjab in the 1980s and early 1990s in this context. Women from PIS were the first ones to reach

[18] Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).

[19] Cynthia Cockburn, "Gender in Armed Conflict and Peace Processes," *Cyprus Review* 13, no. 1 (2001): 53–72.

[20] National Federation of Indian Women, *Congress Report* (1986), 2.

out to the families of the victims of militancy, as well as the police led counterinsurgency. They would travel across Punjab in case of any death or violence. Sometimes they would hold protests in support of the family that had lost their loved ones. This was a mark of solidarity and a defiance of the militants' dictate. Normally, after a death, most people would refrain from establishing contact with the family, since it could "endanger" them, too. But the women in PIS did the opposite to show their solidarity with the family and their courage and resistance to such violence. Following Indira Gandhi's assassination and the subsequent riots in Delhi, the PIS was one of the earliest organisations to arrive at the sites of violence. Vimla Dang, describes in her interview the extent of the "massacre that happened in Faridabad and Delhi". The delegation of women from PIS went to Delhi, in areas like Sultanpuri, Mangolpuri, Shahdra, where mass killings happened. Aruna Asaf Ali[21] led a campaign, the AISF did a peace mission.[22]

Official documents provided insights into the proceedings and broad work undertaken by the PIS. However, these records do not delve into the personal experience of the people involved in those struggles within the context of their times. In this quest, I turned to the method of interviews. Kumud Sharma posits that the term "oral history embraces a range of practices and attempts to bring alive a past that the written words have failed to capture."[23] This research draws on interviews with second-generation members of the PIS in Chheharta (Amritsar) and Chandigarh, whose recollections—based on stories told by their parents—provided rich contextual insights. A few of them had been involved in the anti-militancy movement in Punjab during the 1980s and were able to share their own first-hand experiences of those times. During an interview with Comrade Pali, one of the members of PIS, she remembered how they would continue to hold meetings in the militancy-affected villages,

[21] Aruna Asaf Ali was an influential Indian independence activist, educator, and politician, renowned as the "Grand Old Lady of Indian Independence" for her pivotal role in the Quit India Movement of 1942 and her work in advocating for social reforms. She was also the founding member and President of the NFIW in India.

[22] These oral history interviews were found in the archive section of the Nehru Memorial Library. Most of these leaders had passed away by the time this research was conducted. G. Chibbar, "Vimla Dang: Oral History Interview Transcript," Oral History Project, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2006.

[23] Kumud Sharma, *Memory Frames: Oral Narratives of Four First Generation Women's Studies Scholars* (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 2005), 7.

despite the lurking threat to their lives. She recalled that in one of the meetings in Jallalabad village, the tensions were palpable due to the militant presence as they assembled the people for a convening.[24] PIS decided to conduct a conference for women there. They travelled by bus. During the conference, militants stood nearby with weapons, observing throughout. The PIS members spoke against militancy without direct provocation, often quoting sermons and verses from the *Guru Granth Sahib* that condemned such violence. Vimla Dang, along with others, had arranged the meeting. Their meeting ended, and the people went back. While they were waiting for the bus, militants passed in front of them, chanting that they (the militants) had won.

During this period, a slogan coined by one of the PIS members became widely popular, echoing through rallies organised by women activists, trade union members, and left leaders across Punjab. The slogan went as follows, "*Addwad Wakhwad Murdabad, Na Hindu Raj, Na Khalistan, Jug Jug Jive Hindustan*".[25] It means they didn't want a Hindu-ruled land *or* a Sikh-ruled land; they only wanted a long and happy life for their country, India.

Another incident recalled by a respondent was when a family suffered a major blow by the militants, who killed almost everyone, except for a boy in class nine. Although the respondent was a government schoolteacher, she took a month's leave to care for him. Her association with the PIS often placed her in danger. On one occasion, militants arrived at her school and threatened to kill her if she did not end her activities. She recalled another instance during a *bandh* announced by militant groups, when a Hindi examination was scheduled. Although the militants discouraged the use of Hindi, she went to school to help conduct the exam. They confronted her again, warning her to stop her work with the organisation. She reiterated her stance that she was not doing anything wrong, and finally asked them—How many languages does Gurbaksh Singh[26] know? In challenging the militants' attempts to silence them,

[24] Interview with Comrade Pali, member of the Punjab Istree Sabha (PIS) in Chheharta, Amritsar, 15 October, 2017.

[25] Chibbar, "Vimla Dang Oral History Interview," 2006.

[26] Gurbaksh Singh was born in Sialkot in 1895. He obtained a diploma in Civil Engineering from Thomason College, Roorkee, before securing an engineering degree from Michigan University. He returned to India to serve the motherland and joined the Indian Railways. His landmark achievements included his contribution in the construction of Gurdwara Panja Sahib in 1935 and the establishment of the Punjabi literary magazine *Preet*

the respondent invoked Punjab's reformist past, citing social reformers whose transformative work was being eroded by the regressive ideology and violent actions of the militants.

Communist activists and PIS women strategically employed Sikh scriptures and teachings to frame their appeals for peace, unity, and communal harmony within culturally resonant idioms. One of the leaders of the PIS composed a song with reference to Guru Tegh Bahadur saving Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmiri Muslims. The song achieved wide circulation, becoming a fixture at PIS meetings and community gatherings in villages most affected by militancy, where it served as a cultural expression of resistance and hope. These included areas like Tarn Taran in the Majha district and Amritsar. Some of the lines from the song are as follows:

Ghata kaliyan chaiyan ne, Ghata kaliyan chaiyan ne,
Desh Punjab mere nu, kisne nazara laiyan ne,
Phulan vich gulab da naa (naam)
Saara jag jaana hain, Mere sone Punjab da naa (naam)
Hanju cham cham vagde ne,
Hanju cham cham vagde ne,
Vaidyan toh sun pai gai, Mele madiyan vich lagde ne,
Mele madiyan vich lagde ne.

[Black clouds have gathered all around,
Who has cursed my Punjab, just like among flowers,
The name of Rose is acclaimed, in a similar way,
The name of my Punjab is acclaimed throughout the world,
Tears drop from my eyes,
Tears drop from my eyes,
Courtyards have become desolate, and

Lari as well as Preet Nagar, a Mecca to progressive thinkers and writers. Celebrated thinkers like Mulk Raj Anand, Balraj Sahni, Shobha Singh, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi, to name a few, either lived in or frequented Preet Nagar Gurbaksh Singh, being a literary connoisseur, also knew various languages. By quoting his example, the point being made was that Gurbaksh Singh, one of the most well-respected personalities in Punjab, was someone who knew various languages, respected and facilitated writings in these languages. By using this logic, the respondent was countering the militants' logic that, as a Sikh, one should not be promoting or facilitating other languages within the state (Sharma 2019).

> Fairs (people collectivising) are happening in the graveyards.][27]

Vimla Dang, in her oral history interview, says,

> The technique of using scriptures was employed to create a feeling of humanity among the people. When they would say these words from the Guru Granth, the women who would be listening to these words would cover their heads with the chunni. Using these techniques, they requested not to use places of religion to spread militant activities.[28]

PIS engaged in close collaboration with poets and theatre artists, using performances and literary platforms as tools to foster critical awareness and collective reflection on the violence of militancy. For instance, Amrita Pritam, veteran novelist, activist, and the first prominent female poet in Punjabi, had composed a song during India's partition in 1947. This composition is a plea to the 18th-century Sufi poet Waris Shah (of the Heer Ranjha fame) to speak from his grave and capture the tragedy of Punjab, a land ravaged by violence, blood and corpses. PIS members used this poem as a response to the violence of militancy and the growing secessionist movement for Khalistan. Some of its lines are as follows

> *Aj akhan Waris Shah nu ti kon kabran vichon bol*
> *Te aj ki tabe ishq da koi agla var ka phol*
> *Ik roi sidhii Punjab dii tu likh-likh mare vain*
> *Aj lakkhan dheeyan rondian tainuu n Waris Shah noon kahan*
> *Uth dard mandaan diya dardiya*
> *Uth tak apna Punjab!*
> *Aj bele laashaan bichiyaan*
> *Tey lahu dii bhari Chenab!*
>
> [I say to Waris Shah today, speak from your grave,
> And add a new page to your book of love.
> Once, a daughter of Punjab wept, and you wrote your long saga.
> Today, thousands weep, calling to you, Waris Shah,

[27] Translation from Nakul Singh Sawhney, dir., *Once Upon a Time in Chheharta*, feature-length documentary (India, 2007).

[28] Chibbar, 2006.

Arise, o friend of the afflicted.
Arise and see the state of Punjab,
Corpses strewn on fields,
And the Chenab flowing with much blood.] (translation mine)

Gursharan Singh, a leading playwright and theatre activist, revolutionised Punjab's cultural landscape by reimagining theatre as a tool of political consciousness. Beginning in the 1960s, when theatrical activity was minimal, he took his performances to rural areas in 1969, defying the notion—widely held among artists and writers—that theatre could not resonate with rural audiences. He worked tirelessly for the cause of the working class, farmers, labourers, women, Dalits, and anyone who was oppressed, through his courageous plays. During militancy, PIS members also acted in some of these plays. They also used this platform to spread messages of peacebuilding among the people of Punjab. These plays were performed in remote villages of Punjab, which were impacted by the militancy. In an interview, his daughter, Navcharan, reflected that her father consciously created space for women's participation in rural theatre. He did this by refusing to begin performances until the women were free from their domestic chores and could join the audience—an act that subtly challenged prevailing gender norms. Parul, in her article, writes, "During the days of militancy in Punjab, he staged a play, *Hit List*, a direct attack on terrorists who had him on their hit list".[29]

Such actions are indicative of the layered nature of resistance within the movement. By ensuring the attendance of women in these performances, activists contested entrenched gender norms even as they resisted the broader climate of insurgency and militant violence in Punjab. Rajan posits that "'Resistance' is a term that has a range of meanings, from describing an intransigent attitude or behaviour; a deliberate course of oppositional action; a 'natural' counterforce to an organised collective movement for change ('activism') by individuals and people subjected to various kinds of domination. Increasingly, any 'agency' is treated as synonymous with resistant agency. It is not (yet) a revolutionary term since, as we notice, it is a praxis that is reactive to domination rather than one that initiates a

[29] Parul, "Ode to a Revolutionary," *The Indian Express*, June 30, 2019, 7.

transformation".[30] Resistance within the anti-militancy movement took multiple, intersecting forms. It was evident in theatre performances that advocated communal harmony; in women's defiance of militant dress codes; in the determined journeys of PIS leaders who cycled through Amritsar at the epitome of violence; and in Pash's revolutionary poetry, which challenged militancy despite the mortal danger he faced. Each act embodied everyday defiance against violence - both ideological and physical.

These plays were unique in their dialogic form, as theatre artists directly engaged with audiences. This strategy was pivotal in ensuring that the message of peace and solidarity was both accessible and powerful. Despite the constant threat of violence, women, children, and the elderly gathered to witness these plays, transforming theatre into a collective act of both courage and resistance. In urban Punjab, this performative resistance extended to a wider sphere through street theatre. Through these performances, they discussed the issues of militancy, killings by the militants, excesses being committed by the state police, etc. Across Punjab's villages, protest marches brought together PIS members, left political groups, and cultural activists. By invoking the philosophy of Bhagat Singh, these processions transformed public spaces into arenas of political education, using his ideals to counter communal polarisation and promote social consciousness. This was also done to counter the appropriation of Bhagat Singh by some militant and political forces, who were using his teachings to spread misinformation.[31]

It was not just the women in PIS, but also other leaders who deployed the strategy of using holy scriptures to propagate the message of peace. Comrade Darshan Singh Canadian, killed by the militants on 25 September 1986, also used this strategy. In one of his most famous speeches, in which he addressed a gathering, he clearly articulated that Guru Nanak rejected reactionary views. He said that the tenth Guru describes Khalsa as "the one who protects the interests of the people. The terrorists track down each opponent of Khalistan, try to kill him and, if possible, his family, too. The readers should judge for themselves whether these Sikhs are those of the Gurus or do they belong to

[30] Rekha S. Rajan, "Feminism and the Politics of Resistance," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 154.

[31] Anand Patwardhan, *In Memory of Friends*, documentary film (1990).

Aurangzeb".[32] Darshan Singh used these teachings to denounce the propagation of the militants and their narrow view of the "Khalsa" or Sikh land. These lectures exerted a significant influence, as they strategically employed religious teachings to contest the militants' appropriation of Sikh identity and their self-ascribed authority as its guardians. Dilbaag, a member of the CPI, in his interview, said that when the militants confronted Darshan Singh Canadian on the fateful day of his death, they did not kill him instantly. There was an argument for 45 minutes on religion and how it is interpreted. When they were unable to win the argument on theological lines, they killed him. A procession was taken out the next day, extolling Darshan Singh's work and protesting the merciless killing.[33] Vimla Dang especially remembers the spirit of his wife, Banso, even in that time of grief. Vimla writes,

> I remember just how, before the cremation, Banso had mounted the van decorated with the red flags on which the martyr's body had been placed, and, as it drove at the head of the funeral procession from Langeri to Mahipalpur, how she had stood in the front, shouting vociferously, 'Down with Extremism and Separatism', 'Hindu-Sikh Ekta Zindabad', 'Comrade Canadian Lal Salaam'... It required great courage for a woman in her situation to do that.[34]

There were some individual incidents as well, where women showed a lot of grit in the face of death and violence. One such incident involved Bibi Jaswant Kaur, wife of Comrade Harnam Singh. The incident has been described in the NFIW Bulletin in the following words:

> 9 April 1988 was a day like any other for Dr Harnam Singh, MLA, his wife, Jaswant Kaur, and their family, who lived in the village of Shahbad in Haryana. At 8.15 in the evening, there was a loud rapping at the front door. Dr Harnam Singh opened the door to find a stranger standing before him. He was quick to spot the pistol in the stranger's hand and bit his hand hard. The pistol fell. A struggle ensued, and two

[32] Satyapal Dang, *Darshan Singh "Canadian": Terrorism in Punjab* (New Delhi: Patriot, 1987), 49.

[33] Interview with Dilbaag (member of the Communist Party of India), Chandigarh, Punjab, 20 February, 2018.

[34] Ibid., 94, n.p

> more people emerged from the dark. In the meantime, Jaswant Kaur, her son, daughter-in-law, and a nephew had also come out from the inner room to see what the matter was. Jaswant Kaur caught hold of the first assailant, named Gurjaint Singh (a dreaded terrorist), by his hair. In the ensuing fight, Dr Harnam Singh broke an arm, and his son, daughter-in-law, and nephew lost their lives. The two men then tried to get to Jaswant Kaur and free their companion. She bravely restrained her captor with her bare hands, refusing to release him even as bullets struck her and her family lay dead or wounded around her. Finally, unable to free their companion, the other two shot him dead and escaped.[35]

For this act of courage, the Haryana government awarded Rs 50,000 each to Jaswant Kaur and her husband. The lane on which their house stood has been renamed "*Shaheedon ki Gali"* (The Martyrs' Lane) to honour those of her family who died fighting the extremists.[36] This also shows how the state's token gestures through compensation or symbolic recognition of victims operate as mechanisms of self-exoneration. They allow the state to project empathy while evading accountability and suppressing uncomfortable political questions. Responding to these questions has the potential to expose the realities and, in turn, blur the boundaries of good and evil that are created by the state.[37]

These incidents served as a stark reminder to leaders and women involved in the left movement and the PIS of their constant exposure to danger within a deeply volatile political environment. In Chheharta, the Communist Party comrades and workers devised a strategy to ensure their safety. In most cases, the men were involved in the trade union movement of left political parties such as the CPI, while their wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law became active in the PIS. While many leaders went underground under threat from militants, their partners continued the relief work and agitation through PIS. However, the uncertainty was not easy to live with. This is demonstrated through the following incident. One of the leaders of the PIS, Vimla Dang's

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[35] National Federation of Indian Women, *NFIW Bulletin on Militancy and Relief Work in Punjab* (New Delhi, 1988).

[36] Ibid.

[37] Yasmin Saikia, "Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh," *History Workshop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2004).

husband, Satyapal Dang, was also under threat and thus had to go underground for several months.

Vimla Dang continued to stay in their one-room set above the Chheharta party office. Some security guards were deputed at the party office, where Vimla Dang resided. Since her room was on the terrace, the surrounding walls were raised to protect her from potential sniper attacks. The routes Satyapal was to travel across Punjab were kept undisclosed—even from him—for security reasons. It was a period of great uncertainty. Vimla, in one of her diaries, has written about the challenges they faced in that period. At one point, when the killings of communist leaders were rampant, Satyapal's life was also at great risk. He went underground, and his whereabouts were unknown to her. She continued to remain in Chheharta throughout the period, steadfastly organising PIS activities and sustaining the organisation's presence at the local level. However, internally, she was in a state of turmoil as she feared for the safety of her partner. They exchanged brief notes through their lunch box, which became her only assurance of his safety.

Members of PIS and the NFIW also suffered huge losses during this period in Punjab. An active member of the NFIW, along with her husband and brother-in-law, was gunned down by the militants due to the work they were doing to maintain Hindu–Sikh unity. Many other members also lost their near and dear ones.[38] Activists and people from literary circles, who used their writings, poetry, and plays to counter the militants, were also not spared. A stalwart who was killed in the year 1988 was Avtar Singh Sandhu (better known by his pen name, Pash).[39] Murphy posits that Pash, like Darshan Singh Canadian, invoked the teachings of the Gurus in his opposition to separatism.[40] He was a vocal critic of Hindu nationalist forces as well as of the excesses committed

[38] NFIW, *Congress Report* (1986), 2.

[39] Pash was a famous poet of Punjabi literature in the 1970s and 1980s. He was inspired by the Naxalite movement and known for his poetry of resistance. The four volumes of his poetry—*Loh Katha*, *Udadiyan Bazan Magar*, *Saddey Sameyaan Vich*, and *Khilre Hoye Warke*—have been translated into several languages. He was gunned down by militants on 23 March 1988 at the age of 38, along with his friend, right outside his house, in the fields. He was to leave for the US the next day since his life was under threat, and he was in India to get his visa renewed. Winkle Sandhu, "Pash, My Father," *The Tribune*, May 24, 2020.

[40] Anne Murphy, "Writing Punjabi Across Borders," *South Asian History and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2018): 8.

by the police. In his work, Pash consistently engaged with themes of inequality and oppression, underscoring his belief that the gravest threat to humanity emerges when individuals lose critical consciousness—when they cease to question structures of power or relinquish the capacity to imagine and strive for a more just and inclusive world. With an increase in deaths and atrocities committed by the militants, the police also increased the rampage against them. In this process, they committed a lot of atrocities against the civilians on the grounds of suspicion.

Women were the worst sufferers, as they lost their family members to terrorist deaths or to police custody. Excesses like rapes and physical violence were also committed by the police in huge numbers, and there was no place for reprieve.[41] It was in this context that PIS intensified the campaign against all these atrocities and brought national leadership of the NFIW to the fore in the fight against militancy. At the peak of militancy, Aruna Asaf Ali visited Amritsar, and from there the PIS launched "*Aman* van", a peaceful procession. To build national solidarity against the escalating militancy and violence in Punjab, NFIW leaders organised a countrywide tour from Delhi, in which PIS members and leaders also took part. The delegation travelled through interior regions across India—from Kashmir and Rajasthan to Punjab, the North-East, and Bengal—linking diverse borderlands and conflict zones. The procession's success lay in its inclusivity, uniting women's organisations, trade union activists, and prominent cultural figures in a collective assertion of peace and secularism. These peacekeeping processions included the likes of poet Kaifi Azmi[42], his daughter, Shabana Azmi, and actress Dina Pathak.[43] By participating in these events organised by PIS on the issue of Khalistan, they not only lent support to the movement but also helped it gain traction. In

[41] Laws and Lacopino say that "Punjab police retaliated with systematic torture and summary executions. In addition, police arrested, detained without charges, systematically tortured and killed thousands of Sikhs who were perceived to be sympathetic to the militant movement. One recent report documented that more than 2,000 persons killed in police custody were cremated illegally in one district of Punjab alone". Ami Laws and Vincent Iacopino, "Police Torture in Punjab, India: An Extended Survey," *Health and Human Rights* 6 (2002): 197.

[42] Kaifi Azmi was an active member of IPTA and a Communist Party member

[43] A veteran actress, Dina Pathak, was also a member of IPTA and in the executive council of the NFIW.

addition, it significantly contributed to raising funds for the victims of militancy, for whom the PIS was actively undertaking relief work.[44]

In an interview, Ameera Sultana, a daughter of a PIS member recounted the moving speeches by PIS leaders that highlighted the suffering of women and children in Punjab during the militancy. Many times, these women started crying while giving the speeches, which also moved the crowds to tears. Collective mourning in a public space is both a political act and a way of resistance. Shared emotions consolidate the collective identity, along with being therapeutic.[45] De Volo also points out that this act of collective mourning is very much gendered too, as "collective public expressions of mourning might have a better public reception if those grieving are women".[46] Ather Zia describes the political importance of collective acts of mourning or grief by women in places like Kashmir. She says these acts go beyond formal modes of resistance and, in a way, subvert social expectations.[47] These women from PIS use emotions to connect with the people and create a sense of collective identity. This act of connecting with people in a way that resonates with their most vulnerable aspects goes a long way in building and showing solidarity. As Zia says, these are crucial ways in which women operate in the public and political sphere and offer their resistance.[48]

Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust

A major achievement of the PIS was the establishment of the Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust (PISRT) in 1989. This awareness emerged as PIS undertook its peace operations, during which the organisation became deeply conscious of the harsh socio-economic realities faced by people on the ground, particularly women and children. When the members interacted with family members of the deceased due to militancy or during the counterinsurgency operations by the police, they were struck by the realisation that apart from

[44] Shared by Ameera Sultana in an interview during the fieldwork conducted by the author at Chheharta, Amritsar on 17 February 2018.

[45] Lorraine De Volo, "Collective Mourning and Public Memory: Gendered Practices of Grief," *Sociological Perspectives* 49, no. 4 (2006): 462.

[46] Ibid., 462.

[47] Ather Zia, "'Their Wounds Are Our Wounds': A Case for Affective Solidarity between Palestine and Kashmir," *Identities* 27, no. 3 (2020): 357.

[48] Ibid., 357.

emotional upheaval, this also led to economic stress. Such a situation would lead to children dropping out of school and entering the workforce, and with this would come all their vulnerability to child labour. Although the government offered Rs 20,000 to the families of the deceased, it was not enough to support the families through the crisis. On many occasions, this compensation was delayed due to administrative hurdles, compounding the suffering of these families. The editorial of the NFIW (1988) discusses this issue, stating,

> Women have been the worst sufferers in this situation. Hundreds of women have lost their husbands; thousands of children have become orphans. The memory of murderous assaults haunts those who saw their dear ones being dragged out of their homes, made to stand in a row and shot dead. And then there are numerous examples of entire families having been wiped out, kerosene sprinkled on their dead bodies, and homes set on fire.[49]

PIS advocated with the government to increase the quantum of compensation, given the economic hardships the families were facing. They also demanded an increase in the pension for widows (fixed at Rs 250 per month) who were not keen to take up a government job. PIS demanded that this sum be increased to Rs 500.[50] Many widows, whether affected by militancy or police violence, also faced disputes with their in-laws over their late husbands' property and were often entangled in prolonged litigation. To address this, PIS recommended that the Deputy Commissioner establish a committee of officers to resolve such cases promptly.[51]

In the year 1984, after the anti-Sikh pogrom, the PIS workers started a campaign to collect clothes, utensils, and money for the victims and their families. They managed to raise an additional Rs 30,000, over and above other collected items, which was distributed to the victims through the NFIW. PIS also set up a scholarship fund for orphaned children in Punjab through which scholarships were provided to around 65 children till 1988. They initiated a solidarity movement across states, organising meetings, cinema shows, and

[49] *NFIW Bulletin* (1988), 01.
[50] Ibid., 02.
[51] Ibid., 02.

youth festivals to raise funds through other NFIW members.[52] The movement was a resounding success.

Recognising the success of this initiative and the transparency in allocating funds to the victims, CPI MP Gurudas Dasgupta contributed Rs 6 lakhs, which he had received as a reward for exposing a multinational company. It was this contribution that led to the inception of the PISRT on 17 January 1989. The primary objective of the trust was to support families—particularly women and children—who had been affected by militancy, such as those who had lost their main breadwinner. The money from the trust was used for various activities, depending on the needs of the people—capacitating women in some skills to ensure a livelihood for them; awarding scholarships to children, including money for books, so that their education could continue; ensuring provision of rations and medicines for family members if required. However, the trust's foremost aim was to ensure that children from such families could continue their education, despite financial difficulties or other hardships at home.

The PISRT funded education through scholarships for children whose families had lost the breadwinner, whether to militants or to police. It also helped the families of militants or suspected militants who were killed during this period by the police under their counterinsurgency operations. PISRT worked across Punjab, but its central office, as well as the focus of work, was in Chheharta, Amritsar. Their aim was to assist families affected by violence (both from the militancy as well as the police), irrespective of which side of the spectrum they belonged to. Over the years, this trust has supported the education of several children, especially orphans. The trust received funds from people across the country due to the excellent reputation it had earned, as noted by several donors to the PISRT during the interview. This was possible due to the trust's impeccable record-keeping, painstakingly maintained by the PIS leadership. The detailed notes and meticulous records of expenditures, found in the diaries during fieldwork, were invaluable in understanding the work and activism undertaken, which would otherwise have remained undocumented. Each donor received a letter detailing exactly how their contribution had been utilised. Preparing these records required considerable manual effort, to

[52] Ibid., 03.

which the leadership devoted several hours on a regular basis. This also highlights how the life of an activist encompasses multiple dimensions, extending far beyond agitations and on-the-ground politics

Conclusion

The history of militancy in Punjab has often been narrated through binaries of militants versus the state, secessionism versus nationalism, or Sikhs versus Hindus. Yet, this research on PIS shows that the lived realities are far more nuanced. Women activists protested against both militant violence and the state's authoritarian excess, carving out a space for alternative political praxis. They undertook resistance through material support, public protests and using cultural idioms for resistance despite widespread fear and repression. The experiences of the Punjab Istree Sabha during this period reveal that resistance in Punjab was not confined to militants and the state but extended into grassroots spaces shaped by inter alia, women's activism. Far from being passive sufferers, PIS members asserted agency through protests, cultural work, and sustained relief operations. The women in the PIS used religious scriptures, poetry, and theatre as effective tools of protest and messaging for peace and unity across the length and breadth of Punjab. Even in the face of threats by the militants, they supported the bereaved families and relentlessly pursued the objective of peaceful solidarity.

The Punjab Istree Sabha Relief Trust was a crucial institution that became an emblem of not only providing financial support for victims, their families, and orphans but also symbolising their solidarity efforts. The alternative archives, oral history interviews and diaries of the women involved in the peacebuilding efforts reveal how memory unfolds, especially in the time the narratives are captured. Punjab, during the 1980s and 1990s, was hit by both militancy and counterinsurgency launched by the state apparatus to counter the militants. While the impact of the counterinsurgency has been widely documented and debated, official records and archival documents largely overlook it, offering only fleeting references.[53] The PISRT worked with the women and children who were impacted by both the militant and police excesses, yet specific incidents, at least in the documents, were only those of

[53] Sanam Sutirath Wazir, *The Kaurs of 1984: The Untold, Unheard Stories of Sikh Women* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2024).

militant killings. It was only during a few interviews conducted during this research that the incidents of police excesses, sexual violence inflicted on women by them and the impact on families were mentioned. Grewal and Sabherwal argue that the prevailing perception of the period of violence in Punjab is that it was ultimately subdued by the state apparatus.[54] While the police excesses under the garb of draconian laws like the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) enabled violence, "people's memories did not organise themselves around these legal dimensions".[55]

During an interview with one of the women from Punjab Istree Sabha, she did mention that while their initial focus was to rehabilitate families impacted by militancy, they soon realised the magnitude of violence by the police on the "militants" and the impact on their families. Thus, the broader objective of PISRT was to work towards the rehabilitation of anyone impacted by violence. However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many leaders of the leftist movement viewed the state's counterinsurgency measures as regrettable, yet necessary. This can probably be attributed to the significantKaura losses the left movement in Punjab had to face due to militant activity. Murphy notes that, although many within the CPI opposed the formation of Khalistan and the actions of the militants, they did not hold the state accountable for the excesses it committed. In contrast, figures such as the poet Pash highlighted the brutalities perpetrated by both sides through their literary and artistic works.[56]

This paper attempted to research and document the voices of women involved in political movements during a tumultuous period in Punjab. It raises various questions which can benefit from a more detailed study, such as the intersection of communism with theism. The members of PIS propagated their political viewpoint through cultural and social symbolism, which people, especially women, could relate to. They even used religious scripts from the Guru Granth Sahib during militancy to propagate the message of peace and harmony. And although communism historically strives to stay away from

[54] Inderpal Grewal and Sharanjit Sabherwal, "Slow Violence in Post-1984 Punjab: Remembering, Forgetting and Refusals," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 344.

[55] Ibid., 345.

[56] Murphy, "Writing Punjabi Across Borders," 2018.

religion, rather denouncing it, the traditions of Sikhism are embedded within the overall work of PIS, especially during the period of militancy. This was critical in both contextualising and relating their overall messages to the people of the region. In this context, a potential area for research is the way communism, or any political movement, negotiates everyday beliefs and religious practices while maintaining its core principles

Another potential area for research. A critical area of research is to understand the role and experiences of women in larger political and leftist movements in India. Future research should particularly examine the experiences of women associated with these movements through their kinship with male members, as their narratives may reveal both their contributions to the movement and the domestic as well as organisational challenges they faced. These issues are critical to explore, which remain largely invisible in current scholarship. Understanding these experiences is essential for exploring the gendered nature of contemporary Indian politics, as well as the contributions of women to broader socio-political contexts. Music has historically served as a medium of political communication, critiquing existing social norms and mobilising protest.[57] Despite this long-standing relationship between music and politics, it has received limited attention in academic and social-science research. While this study does not explore the topic in full depth, it documents numerous protest songs from the 1980s that offer a rich insight into the culture of political protest.

Many of these songs remain undocumented, surviving only in women's memories, sometimes passed to subsequent generations, often losing words and nuances in the process. In conclusion, the research reiterates that oral narratives, songs, and diaries serve as crucial methodological tools for reconstructing and understanding the experiences of women and marginalised communities. These sources complicate the silences of official records, positioning women's memories as critical archives of resistance. Situating the work of PIS and the experiences of its members during militancy provides insights which otherwise remain lost and confined to only those who experienced it. It underscores that women, through everyday acts of courage and care, reshaped the terrain of conflict. Reflecting on the contributions of

[57] Sumangala Damodaran, "Protest and Music," in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*, ed. William R. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

these women activists not only enriches the historiography of militancy but also affirms the relevance of feminist and left movements in envisioning peace and social justice during times of rupture.

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Negotiating Empire: The Colonial Post Office and Indian Society

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The post office arrived in India as part of a colonial agenda, intended mainly as a tool for the British to manage their empire. Over time, it emerged as a space of interaction between British officials and Indian society, where both influenced each other. This paper looks at how, what started as a foreign system became an integral part of Indian daily life, and also explores how, in its early years, the colonial post office dealt with all sorts of difficulties and emerged not only as a space of compliance but also as one of subversion. The paper highlights this dual character of colonial institutions and shows how the post office was reworked into a hybrid institution through dense local participation. This paper draws on firsthand written accounts of colonial officials, postal reports, oral histories, private letters, and a wide range of literature to examine the colonial post office as a site of negotiation between imposition and adaptation. Thus, this paper calls for a rethinking of colonial infrastructures, viewing them not only as static instruments of domination but also as dynamic arenas of social history.

Keywords: Negotiations, Post-Office, Adaptation, Society, Letters.

Introduction

Conventional histories of the empire largely focused on conquests, administration, and control, but colonial infrastructures like roads, railways, telegraphs, and postal networks offer an important parallel perspective for the historical exploration of colonialism. These networks were designed to strengthen control and to project state power, yet they were continuously shaped by society. The Indian post office is a rich example of this paradox. Established through a colonial code and in pursuit of imperial goals, the post office aimed to solidify the British presence and power across the vast empire. From the beginning, however, it was integrated into the daily lives of Indians, highly influenced by local habits, customs, cultural expressions, and political pressures. The experiments and reforms were bold attempts at bureaucratic unity, meant to help the empire communicate more effectively. Yet, in reality,

it revolutionised and transformed communication from a privilege reserved for elites to something available to subalterns.

The post office was not merely an institution forced upon a passive population, it represented a 'negotiated empire,' as it became a space of ongoing interaction between the empire and the people. Villagers, traders, scribes, migrants, pilgrims, and women found ways to subtly engage with and reshape the institution, eventually transforming personal relationships and communities. While the British aimed to control space, time, and communication through stamps and set rates, India's social fabric, rich with its caste rules, kinship ties, honorific language, and rituals, interpreted those regulations in its own unique ways. This paper highlights what Carolyn Marvin has argued, namely how swiftly and profoundly new modes of communication reshape the contours of human society and alter the very fabric of communities.[1] Thus the aim is to move beyond the simple coloniser-colonised binary, by highlighting the post office as a lively cultural and social entity, worked upon by both parties.

Communication before the Colonial rule

The idea of a postal service was not new to India. Long before the East India Company set up its post offices, South Asian rulers had created a complex system for delivering messages, but these services were maintained purely for state purposes.[2] The Delhi Sultanate relied on foot runners known as *'el-davah,'* and horse-based delivery called *'el-wolak,'* to send news between the imperial cities.[3] The fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta also praised the system's efficiency.[4] Later, the Grand Trunk Road built by Sher Shah Suri became a major channel for communication, with rest stops called serais roughly every four miles, where horses and runners were kept ready to deliver the imperial

[1] Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late 19th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3-8.

[2] S. K. Pain, "Growth and Development of Postal Communication in Colonial Bengal with Special Emphasis on Dinajpur: A Historical Review," *Ensemble* 3, no. 1 (2021): 197-204.

[3] G. Clarke, *The Post Office of India and Its Story* (Plymouth: The Mayflower Press, 1921), 10-26.

[4] Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta: India, Maldive Islands and Ceylon*, trans. and commentary by Mahdi Husain, 2nd ed., reprint (Baroda: Oriental Institute, M. S. University of Baroda, 1976), xxvii-xxix.

messages. During Akbar's rule this system was further improved; however, these networks mainly served rulers, merchants, and elites.[5] For a villager, communication remained oral, physical, and local. Caste and social identities maintained the flow of information, like the barber (nai) used to spread news during weddings, the drummer used to make announcements, and the traveling bards used to share stories. Letters did exist but were mostly for the elites like mercantile and courtly classes.

The coming of the East India Company changed this situation. With trade and territorial expansion, the demand for reliable communication increased. Runners, known as cossids,[6] *kasids*,[7] and harkaras became essential for circulating commercial and political information. They remained as the backbone of the old postal system. Yet, the system was slow, haphazard, and fragile. It was not until the nineteenth century that the Company made serious efforts to create a standardised postal system across the empire, resulting in the Post Office Act of 1837[8] which laid the foundation for a unified postal institution, and the subsequent 1854 reforms further strengthened its structure. Most importantly, these reforms brought the institution closer to the public for the first time, paving the way for its eventual evolution beyond the initial imperial intentions.

The Post Office Act of 1854

The 1854 Act was groundbreaking for several reasons. First, it reorganised the postal system into a centralised department under a Director General, unifying the fragmented services of the three presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Second, it introduced postage stamps[9] and a uniform half-anna (1/32 rupee) rate, making communication accessible to more people. As Bowie observed in 1897, the beneficial effects of stamps had "…reached to the

[5] B. K. Sarkar, *Inland Transport and Communication in Medieval India* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1925), 72-82.

[6] H. Giles, *The Handstruck Postage Stamps of India* (Calcutta: The Philatelic Society of India, 1988), 3-26.

[7] B. K. Sarkar, *Inland Transport and Communication in Medieval India* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1925), 72-82.

[8] Giles, *Handstruck Postage Stamps of India,* 3-26.

[9] S. Balakrishnan, "An Ode to India Post." *Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Communications*, 2016.

uttermost ends of the earth, and advantageously influenced the whole of civilised humanity."[10] For the first time, peasants, migrants, and labourers could send letters without high costs, and in comparatively less time. However, intentions and results diverged from the motive. While the British saw the post as an imperial tool, opening the system to the public created unintended consequences in the long run. The rise of letters in vernacular languages,[11] the growth of vernacular newspapers, and the use of the postal service for financial transactions (such as money orders, pensions, and savings) meant that the institution became important and embedded in everyday life. Observers noted this change and its importance with astonishment. Geoffrey Clarke, a senior civil servant in the postal department who wrote a general history of the post office titled *The Post Office of India and its Story* in 1921, noted that "probably in no country in the world is the poor man so dependent upon the post office for the transmission of small sums of money as in India."[12]

Postmen and the People

Central to this institution was the postman. More than just a government and postal employee, he acted as a cultural link between the colonial state and local communities. Unlike the other government employees such as policemen or revenue officials, who represented authority and power, the postman, by contrast, was commonly seen as a friend, sometimes even as a confidant. In Indian society, his work was not restricted to just delivering letters. He read them to those who could not read, wrote replies on their behalf, mediated disputes, and sometimes even helped resolve family tussles. The role of the postman was essential in rural India, where literacy rates were very low. He often worked with professional letter-writers in marketplaces, who composed letters for a fee. This led to the creation of a unique communication economy, through which people who were unable to read or write engaged actively in sending letters. Letter writing and postal services made literacy a shared resource—this will be explored further in the next section.

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[10] A. G. Bowie, *The Romance of the British Post Office* (London: S. W. Partridge Company, 1897),26-33.

[11] G. J. Hamilton, *An Outline of Postal History and Practice* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1910), 197.

[12] Clarke, *Post Office of India,* 71-80.

The post office also carried with it a moral significance. People trusted the postman with money orders, pensions, and important papers. One contemporary district report illustrates how deeply the post office had penetrated local life by the early twentieth century. *The Bankura District Gazetteer* for 1908 recorded 67 post offices, one for every 39 square miles, and around twenty lakh postal articles delivered in a single year, with money orders worth over 9 lakhs paid and more than 6,000 savings deposits.[13] In return for this trust, the postman was expected to be dependable and honest. In the regions with no permanent post offices, his visits were eagerly anticipated. If he missed his regular round, complaints were made quickly. Unlike other officials of the state, who were often exploitative, the postman was viewed as a trustworthy friend. Yet, his role was also fraught with complications. Caste identities and dynamics affected his job. In areas like Malabar, where Brahminical codes were strict, low-caste postmen were prohibited from entering Brahmin neighbourhoods.[14] One infamous incident in Palghat nearly led to unrest when a low-caste postman tried to deliver letters in a Brahmin street.[15] The Postmaster General had to step into this matter, highlighting how imperial institutions were often forced to navigate entrenched social hierarchies within society.

The postman also faced difficult physical challenges, especially in the regions with difficult geographies. For instance, in Bengal's riverine areas, he waded through flooded fields to reach remote villages. On the North-West Frontier, he risked his life amid attacks from tribal raiders. In central India, he travelled through dense forests known for man-eater tigers. His job was not just bureaucratic but also perceived as heroic, and this earned him a place in local folklore as a bringer of both joy and sorrow, carrying news of births and deaths. One very famous example is the poem *The Overland Mail* by Rudyard Kipling, which portrays the postman as a hero.[16]

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[13] L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Bankura* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1908)

[14] Clarke, *Post Office of India, 88-105.*

[15] Ibid, 88-105.

[16] Rudyard Kipling, *Departmental Ditties, Ballads, Barrack Room Ballads and Other Verses* (New York: The Lovell Company, 1899).

Addressing the Unaddressable

For colonial postal administrators, the Indian letter-addressing customs presented a significant obstacle. Indian letters frequently contained complex honorifics, references to ambiguous landmarks, or even literary clues in place of explicit postal codes, in contrast to the typical street addresses found in London or Paris, which were well known to all colonial postal officials. The mail sorter frequently had to deal with extremely vague and unusual addresses. Some letters carried emotional and lengthy phrases rather than precise locations like "To the one inseparable from my heart, the fortunate Babu Sibnath Ghose, having the same heart as mine. From post office Hasnabad to the village of Ramnathpur, to reach the house of the fortunate Babu Prayanath Ghose, district Twenty-four Parganas. Don't deliver this letter to any person, other than the addressee, Mr. Postman. This is my request to you."[17] Some other letters bore only names, completely without any geographic references, such as, "To the sacred feet of the most worshipful and respected brother, Guru Pershad Singh," or "To his highness, the revered brother, beneficent lord of us the poor, my benefactor, Munshi Manik Chand."[18] Europeans were also not immune to this practice of writing honorifics before the name.

Faced with such confusing and eccentric directions and names, the Indian postman developed his own ingenious methods of identification, especially for the addresses and names written in the language with which he was not familiar. As postmen were rarely literate in English, they relied instead on descriptions they invented for themselves. The postman would mark his own notes on the back of the letter in the vernacular, cryptic to anyone else, while the delivery clerk read out names. One telling example was that of a judge of the Calcutta High Court, Sir John Stevens, who noticed that his letters consistently bore the phrase "Old Stevens Sahib" on the reverse, which turned out to be a simple device to distinguish his name from his younger colleague, Justice Stephens.[19] To European officials, such descriptions seemed impractical, and sometimes even absurd. However, postmen and clerks, who

[17] Clarke, *Post Office of India, 88-105.*

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

relied on local knowledge, often delivered them successfully. This leads us to a new arena of collaboration between the rulers and ruled.

These tensions and the solutions borne out of them, between the bureaucratic need for uniformity and local identification practices, reflect the flexible nature of the post office. Ordinarily, the postman was a person deeply familiar with the local quarter, and recipients too rarely objected to being identified through striking personal traits; for example, letters might be addressed to "the man with the lame leg" or "he of the squinting eye."[20] However, the real difficulties arose when correspondence was intended for the members of a constantly moving population, such as pilgrims, mendicants, and other wanderers whose locations were not fixed. In sacred centres such as Banaras, where such transient populations were concentrated, the postal department was compelled to appoint specially trained postmen.[21] Postal workers thus emerged as ethnographers, mapping the social landscapes of the towns and villages they served. Moreover, regional languages added more complexity; for example, a single district could feature Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and various regional dialects, which sometimes made postmen rely only on verbal enquiries. Mistakes occurred frequently, yet successes were common as well, showcasing the resilience of local knowledge networks in laying the strong foundations of this institution.

To address these persistent issues in letter writing and distribution, the colonial post office implemented a number of corrective measures. One such step was to implement instructions in elementary schools on how to properly write correspondence, in coordination with the Education Department. The embossed half-anna (1/32 rupee) envelope was introduced in 1873 as another partial cure, which was offered at the exact value of the stamp and was of a suitable size and texture.[22] The purpose of this innovation was to accustom the public to the usage of standardised covers and to promote the practice of prepayment. However, the issue of underpaid letters continued, and by 1897, they still made up almost one-seventh of all the correspondence the department processed. The difficulties were not merely technical but also

[20] Ibid.

[21] Clarke, *Post Office of India, 88-105.*

[22] G. J. Hamilton, *An Outline of Postal History and Practice* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1910), 129-211.

social, as expressed by Captain G. J. Hamilton of the British Army in his *Outline of Postal History and Practice*.[23] He described the situation as one in which "the comparative backwardness of the country, the apathy of its people, the result of satisfaction and the enervating effect of the climate on foreign residents, all combine to deprive the administration of the aid derived in other countries from complaints."[24] Here, this observation by a colonial bureaucrat captures the prevailing frustration among the officials, who felt isolated in their attempts to reform postal practices in an environment very different from Europe.

Social Life of Letters

The post office played an important and complex role in the history of literacy and education. On one hand, it promoted reading and writing by making letter writing and reading a valuable asset. On the other hand, it allowed even those who could not read to engage in written exchanges through dictation and listening, with the help of the literate. The presence of professional letter-writers (or bazaar writers)[25] introduced another layer. For a small fee, these people would write elaborate letters, filled with metaphors and blessings. This was particularly significant for women. Women, who were barred from formal education, became enthusiastic users of the post through intermediaries. Letters from husbands, sons, and brothers working in cities or the army were vital, providing both emotional support and material help, through letters. Women often took help from postmen or letter-writers to have letters read aloud. In this way, the colonial post fostered new forms of gendered communication, where women were present, but not directly. The content of letters reflect that the post became a medium for many facets of life, including the emotional, economic, and spiritual well-being of the people.

From the British viewpoint, the post office was never completely harmless. The State was always worried that this unrestricted flow of letters could lead to conspiracies and sedition. This also led to the dual role of the post office, of supporting communication while also monitoring it, which persisted

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 180-211.

throughout the colonial period. Vernacular newspapers, which were mainly dependent on postal distribution, faced several strict censorship laws.[26] Occasionally, private letters also served as evidence in sedition trials. Yet, total surveillance was never achieved. Smuggled letters, coded language, and oral messages often went undetected. Ironically, the system that was meant to strengthen the empire also contained elements of anti-colonial resistance. By the early twentieth century, revolutionaries used the post to circulate pamphlets, instructions, and funds. Thus, the empire's network turned into the nation's weapon.

Figure 1: Public letter writer writing a letter for two women in the bazaar
Source: Vintage Punjab: The Archives[27]

The postal communication has also fostered 'acculturation' and accelerated the pace of rural development.[28] The social significance of the post office appears in Indian literature and folklore, as communication was essentially a social affair.[29] Poets and writers often portrayed the postman as a figure to express themes of longing, separation, and fate. Mirza Ghalib, in the mid-

[26] Government of India, *Vernacular Press Act, 1878* (Act No. IX of 1878), enacted 14 March 1878, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1878-9.pdf.

[27] Vintage Punjab: The Archives, "Public letter writer writing a letter for two women in the bazaar, Rawalpindi, Panjab, 1939," Facebook post, September 19, 2015, accessed September 5, 2025, https://share.google/images/mQs1Lo8rePecZRg8J.

[28] A. K. Sinha, "Communication and Rural Development: The Indian Scene" (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 59-70.

[29] C. Cherry, *On Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1957), 1-26.

nineteenth century, wrote letters that became masterpieces, blending humour with sadness.[30] Later, Rabindranath Tagore's play *The Post Office*[31] was also woven around the post office as a modern institution penetrating into the interiors of the subcontinent, and exploring how people perceived it. Moreover, his poem *The Wicked Postman* captures the deep emotional place held by the post office in everyday life.[32] In popular culture, the postman was significant. Folk songs celebrated the arrival of the postman or mourned the sad messages he brought. Stories were told of postmen who faced dangerous situations like storms or tigers to deliver letters. Overall, the institution became part of cultural memory. This cultural appropriation held political weight. It demonstrated how an imperial institution could be made local, filled with community meanings, and integrated into collective identity. The post office was no longer seen as foreign; rather, it became one's own.

Figure 2: The Lost Art of Letter Writing
Source: Sushil Mehra, Pan India Postal Pictorial Place Cancellations[33]

[30] Frances Pritchett and Owen Cornwall, eds., *Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1-20.

[31] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Post Office.* trans. D. Mukherjee (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914).

[32] Rabindranath Tagore, "The Wicked Postman." in *The Crescent Moon* (London: Macmillan, 1913).

[33] Sushil Mehra, "The Lost Art of Letter Writing," image posted to Pan India Postal Pictorial Place Cancellations, Facebook, December 26, 2024, accessed September 5, 2025, https://share.google/images/3DlJ0ZipW9Y5QtecL.

Conclusion

The history of the Indian post office is not just about colonial bureaucracy; rather, it is a history of communities in transition, of cultures dealing with the ideas of modernity, and of the empire transforming from within. What started as an alien institution set up mainly for imperial ease became a deeply rooted part of Indian daily life and society. This change happened slowly and through the countless acts of adjustment on both sides. Postmen navigated physical and caste barriers; villagers adopted and later embraced letter writing while maintaining their oral traditions; women used intermediaries and engaged in correspondence enthusiastically; freedom fighters turned this imperial network into a method of mass resistance; poets and writers gave this institution a place in literature and culture. In conclusion, the post office is a window into the complexities of colonial rule and the society of that time. It shows that infrastructures are not just technical, but also social and cultural. Exploring the post office also reveals the contradictions of the empire, and allows us to engage in historical thinking at its best, by viewing the past not as static foreign domination but as a dynamic interaction. Even today, the history of the post office demonstrates how communities may adapt and reshape the structures of power, and how developing cultures can leave a lasting impact on the institutions that attempted to rule them.

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कौन अमूर्त विचार करता है?[1]
जॉर्ज विल्हेम फ़्रेडरिक हेगेल, 1808

सुरेश चौहान
दर्शनशास्त्र विभाग, दिल्ली विश्वविद्यालय

यह लेख जर्मन दार्शनिक हेगेल के निबंध का पहला हिंदी अनुवाद है। एक आरंभिक प्रयास के रूप में, इसका उद्देश्य हिंदी में हेगेल के मूल लेखों की गंभीर कमी को दूर करना है। एक समाचार पत्र के लिए लिखे गए निबंध के रूप में यह लेख हेगेल की कई केंद्रीय दार्शनिक अवधारणाओं को बेहद सरलता और सुगमता के साथ प्रस्तुत करता है। इसके कारण यह हेगेलीय चिंतन का एक उत्तम परिचय भी है। इस निबंध का मुख्य केंद्र "अमूर्त विचार" की आलोचना है, जिससे हेगेल का आशय, सरल शब्दों में, एकांगी और अपचयी चिंतन से है। इस प्रक्रिया में हमें हेगेल के गहन विचारों और उनके व्यापक दार्शनिक क्षितिज की एक सघन झलक प्राप्त होती है, जिसमें तर्कशास्त्र, तत्वमीमांसा, ज्ञानमीमांसा, नैतिकता, समाज, राजनीति, साहित्य, आदि अनेक क्षेत्र सम्मिलित हैं।

कीवर्ड्स: हिंदी में हेगेल, अमूर्त विचार, जर्मन भाववाद, पाश्चात्य दर्शन, द्वंद्ववाद

परिचय

पाश्चात्य दार्शनिक साहित्य के मूल ग्रंथों का हिंदी में अनुवाद संभवतः आज भी किसी विचारणीय अवस्था में नहीं है। बहुत से महत्वपूर्ण ग्रन्थ हैं, जिनसे आज भी हिंदी-भाषी जगत मात्र भाषा की सीमा के कारण वंचित है। इसमें एक बड़ा नाम आधुनिक जर्मनी के महान दार्शनिक जॉर्ज विल्हेम फ्रेडरिक हेगेल का है, जिनका,

आभार: मैं इस पूरी प्रक्रिया में अपने कुछ मित्रों और संपादक महोदय का उनके सुझावों व सहायता के लिए अत्यंत आभारी हूँ। उनकी सहायता के बिना संभवतः यह निबंध इतनी जल्दी प्रकाशित नहीं हो पाता। इसके बावजूद भी अगर कोई कमी या त्रुटि रह गई हो तो उसका संपूर्ण उत्तरदायित्व मेरा है।

[1] यह अनुवाद मुख्यतः Marxist Internet Archive पर उपलब्ध जॉर्ज विल्हेम फ्रेडरिक हेगेल के 1808 में प्रकाशित निबंध "Who Thinks Abstractly?" के अंग्रेज़ी अनुवाद पर आधारित है। उक्त अंग्रेज़ी पाठ मूल जर्मन से वॉल्टर कॉफ़मैन द्वारा अनूदित है, जो *Hegel: Texts and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966, pp. 113–118) में प्रकाशित हुआ था। ऑनलाइन संस्करण Marxist Internet Archive से लिया गया है [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/se/abstract.htm accessed on 25 सितंबर 2025. यह पाठ Attribution–ShareAlike 2.0 लाइसेंस के अंतर्गत प्रयुक्त किया गया है]।

जहाँ तक मेरी जानकारी है, आज तक कोई भी मूल लेखन हिंदी में प्रकाशित नहीं हुआ है। उनका दार्शनिक लेखन जितना वृहद है, उतना ही जटिल भी है, जिससे निश्चित ही उसका अनुवाद एक कठिन कार्य बन जाता है; लेकिन मात्र कठिनाई के कारण इस कार्य को सदा के लिए स्थगित नहीं किया जा सकता।

हम सभी किसी न किसी रूप में हेगेल के नाम से परिचित हैं। हेगेलीय भाववाद (Idealism) और द्वंद्ववाद (Dialectics) उनके सबसे प्रसिद्ध सिद्धांत हैं। उनके दर्शन ने आधुनिक दर्शन के इतिहास में एक क्रांतिकारी भूमिका निभायी है। इस महान चिंतक के परोक्ष व प्रत्यक्ष प्रभाव का यह मात्र एक छोटा-सा उदाहरण है कि सभी उत्तर-हेगेलीय दार्शनिकों और विचारकों को हेगेल के दर्शन से जूझना पड़ा है, चाहे वह सकारात्मक या नकारात्मक ढंग से हो। लेकिन इस सर्वव्यापी उपस्थिति के बावजूद, हेगेल के मूल लेखन का हिंदी में अभाव है। इसका कारण केवल दार्शनिक और भाषाई कठिनता एवं जटिलता ही नहीं, बल्कि अन्य कारण भी होंगे, जिनकी वस्तृत चर्चा हम यहाँ नहीं कर सकते हैं। लेकिन एक बात स्पष्ट है कि यह अभाव मिटना चाहिए, क्योंकि भाषा की सीमा विचारों की भी सीमा बन जाती है, और यह सीमा मिटनी चाहिए। यह लेख इसी दिशा में एक छोटा, विनम्र और प्रथम प्रयास है। निश्चित ही इसमें कुछ त्रुटियाँ हो सकती हैं, जैसा किसी भी नवीन प्रयास में अवश्यम्भावी है, लेकिन साथ ही इससे प्रयास और सुधार के द्वार भी खुलेंगे।

यहाँ हम हेगेल का कोई बड़ा लेखन नहीं, बल्कि एक संक्षिप्त निबंध प्रस्तुत कर रहे हैं, जो उन्होंने एक स्थानीय समाचार पत्र के लिए लिखा था। इसकी भाषा हेगेल के अन्य लेखन से सापेक्षतः सरल और लोकगम्य है; लेकिन विचारों का गुरुत्व भाषा की सरलता में कहीं भी हल्का नहीं होता, उल्टे और अधिक उभरकर सामने आता है, क्योंकि यह पाठक से सहज सम्बद्ध स्थापित करने में सफल होता है। इस छोटे से लेख में हमें हेगेल के दार्शनिक विचार की तीव्रता, उनके साहित्यिक लेखन-कौशल, उनकी सामाजिक-राजनीतिक चेतना, उनके अतिअमूर्त दार्शनिक सिद्धांतों का दैनिक जीवन से सम्बन्ध, इत्यादि की एक सघन झलक देखने को मिलती है। इस लेख में उपस्थित कई अवधारणाएँ, जो हेगेल के परिपक्व दर्शन में खुलकर आते हैं, अपनी भ्रूण अवस्था में देखे जा सकते हैं।

यहाँ मैं कुछ कुंजीभूत शब्दों पर संक्षेप में बात करना चाहूँगा। इस निबंध के शीर्षक "Wer denkt abstrakt?" ("Who Thinks Abstractly?") में जो दो शब्द मूल जर्मन प्रयोग हुए हैं, वह हैं: "*denkt*" और "*abstrakt*," जिनका अंग्रेजी में अनुवाद "thinks" और "abstract" के रूप किया जाता है। दोनों ही शब्द दार्शनिक रूप से अत्यंत महत्ववपूर्ण हैं। यहाँ मैंने "*denkt*" के लिए "विचार" शब्द चुना है, क्योंकि मेरे विचार में यह उस सक्रिय प्रक्रिया को सबसे बेहतर ढंग से सम्प्रेषित करता है, जिसकी ओर हेगेल संकेत करते हैं । एक और शब्द "चिंतन" यहाँ प्रयोग किया जा सकता था, किन्तु हेगेल के दर्शन में एक अन्य अवधारणा "consciousness" है, जो "thinking" से भिन्न है, "चेतना" एवं "चिंतन" के निकट है।

"Abstract" एक ऐसा शब्द जिसे सुनते ही दर्शन और सिद्धांत की गंध आने लगती है, और ऐसा उचित भी है, क्योंकि यह वैसा ही है। हिंदी में इसके लिए "सूक्ष्म," "निराकार," "गूढ़," इत्यादि जैसे शब्द प्रयोग किये जा सकते हैं, लेकिन "अमूर्त" ही हेगेल के अर्थ के सबसे निकट ज्ञात होता है। लेकिन यहाँ यह ध्यान देने योग्य बात है कि पाश्चात्य दार्शनिक इतिहास में इस शब्द का जो पारम्परिक अर्थ था, हेगेल में इसका अर्थ उससे भिन्न हो जाता है, जिसकी विस्तृत चर्चा यहाँ नहीं की जा सकती है। संक्षेप में, यहाँ "अमूर्त" से हेगेल का अर्थ किसी वस्तु या विचार का इन्द्रिग्राह्य या ठोस न होना, और मात्र विचारों में स्थित होना बिल्कुल भी नहीं है। इसका सरल लेकिन गहन अर्थ मात्र इतना है: किसी वस्तु या विचार को जिन अन्तर्सम्बन्धों के समूह में वह विद्यमान है, उनसे और उसकी गति से काटकर, उसके किसी एक पक्ष का निरपेक्षीकरण कर, और उस एकपक्षीय अवस्थाबिंदु से उसके अन्य सभी गुणों को देखना। इसके विपरीत "मूर्त" (concrete) का अर्थ किसी भी वस्तु या विचार को संपन्न संबंधों, गति व रूपान्तरण में देखना है; पुनः, इसका सम्बन्ध किसी वस्तु के ठोस या दृष्ट होने से नहीं है। निश्चित ही इस निबंध में हेगेल अमूर्त 'विचार' के विरुद्ध खड़े हैं, लेकिन उनके दर्शन में इन दोनों अवधारणाओं के बीच जीवंत व द्वन्द्वात्मक सम्बन्ध देखने को मिलता है, जिसके बीज इस लेख में भी देखे जा सकते हैं।

हेगेल का यह निबंध संभवतः आज और भी प्रासंगिक हो जाता है, जब हम अपने चारों ओर देख सकते हैं कि हेगेल जिन अर्थों में मात्र 'अमूर्त विचार' करने को एकांगी व दोषपूर्ण मानते हैं, वही हावी है। ऐसे में हेगेल का यह निबंध 'अमूर्त विचार' के प्रति एक आलोचनात्मक दृष्टि रखने के लिए दैनिक व सुलभ उदाहरणों के साथ एक गहन व महत्वपूर्ण दार्शनिक तर्क देता है।

अंत में, मैंने कुछ सीमित जगहों पर अनुवाद को शब्दशः न रखकर, रचनात्मक स्वतंत्रता लेकर, संदर्भानुसार वाक्य विन्यास किया है। पाठक की जानकारी और सुविधा के लिए आवश्यकतानुसार फुटनोट भी दिए हैं।

अनुवाद

विचार? अमूर्तन? भागो, अपनी जान बचाओ![2] जो स्वयं को बचा सकते हों बचा लें! मैं अभी भी एक चीखते द्रोही, जो शत्रु के हाथों बिक गया है, के मुँह से ये शब्द सुन सकता हूँ, जो इस निबंध की निंदा मात्र इसलिए करेगा, क्योंकि इसका विषय तत्वमीमांसा है। क्योंकि "तत्वमीमांसा" भी "अमूर्त" और लगभग "विचार" जैसा ही एक शब्द है, जिससे लोग ऐसे दूर भाग खड़े होते हैं जैसे किसी ऐसे व्यक्ति से, जो महामारी से ग्रस्त हो।

[2] यहाँ हेगेल ने फ्रांसीसी उक्ति *Sauve qui peut!* लिखा है, जिसका प्रयोग सामान्यतः ऐसी उथल-पुथल व भगदड़ की स्थिति में होता है, जहाँ हर कोई बस अपनी सुरक्षा के बारे सोच रहा हो।

लेकिन यहाँ हमारा उद्देश्य इतना भी कुटिल नहीं है कि हम 'विचार' और 'अमूर्त' के अर्थ की व्याख्या करें। इस महान दुनिया को व्याख्याओं से अधिक और कुछ भी असहनीय नहीं लगता। स्वयं मुझे भी इससे अधिक बुरा कुछ नहीं लगता कि कोई मुझे किसी चीज़ की व्याख्या दे, क्योंकि आवश्यकता पड़ने पर मैं स्वयं ही समझ जाता हूँ। और वैसे भी यहाँ 'विचार' और 'अमूर्त' को समझाना व्यर्थ होगा, क्योंकि यह महान दुनिया पहले से इनका अर्थ समझती है, और इसीलिए इनसे दूर भागती है। जैसे कोई किसी अज्ञात वस्तु की लालसा भी नहीं कर सकता है, वैसे ही वह उससे धृणा भी नहीं कर सकता। और न ही यहाँ मेरा उद्देश्य कुशलतापूर्वाक इस महान दुनिया और 'अमूर्त' या 'विचार' का मेल कराना है, मानो इन दोनों को, बातों ही बातों में, सबकी दृष्टि और घृणा से बचाकर समाज में चुपके से ले आया गया हो; और समाज द्वारा अनजाने में ही अपना लिया गया हो, या जैसा कि स्वाबियावासी कहते हैं—किसी वस्तु में रच बस गए हों[3]—और अंत में जाकर लेखक ने इस रहस्य को उजागर किया हो कि ये अनोखे अतिथि कोई और नहीं, बल्कि श्रीमान 'अमूर्त' हैं, जिन्हें अब तक सभी एक भले और पुराने परिचित के रूप में किसी और नाम से जान रहे थे। लेकिन ऐसे कारनामे, जो दुनिया को उसकी इच्छा के विरुद्ध कुछ सिखाना चाहते हैं, दोहरे अक्षम्य दोषों से ग्रसित होते हैं: एक तो वे स्वयं को ही लज्जित करते हैं, और दूसरा, इस कारनामे से प्रसिद्धि की भी लालसा रखते हैं; लेकिन ये लज्जा और अहंकार इच्छित प्रभाव को नष्ट कर देते हैं, क्योंकि ये ऐसे मूल्य पर प्राप्त ज्ञान को अवांछित बना देते हैं।

निश्चित ही ऐसी कोई योजना आरम्भ से ही नष्ट होने के लिए अभिशप्त है, क्योंकि इसका आधार ही यह है कि सबसे निर्णायक शब्द बोला ही न जाए। लेकिन यह तो पहले ही निबंध के शीर्षक में हो चुका है। अगर इस निबंध की कोई चंचल-चतुर भावना होती, तो उन शब्दों को शीर्षक में ही स्थान नहीं मिलता, बल्कि वह किसी हास्य-नाटक में एक कैबिनेट मंत्री की तरह पूरे नाटक के दौरान मंच पर अपना कोट पहने घूमता रहता है, और केवल अंत में अपने कोट के बटन खोलकर अपने ज्ञान के चमकते सितारे को प्रकट करता। हालाँकि इस तत्वमीमांसीय बटन का खुलना उतना प्रभावशाली नहीं होता, जितना मंत्री के ओवरकोट के बटन का होता; क्योंकि इस तत्वमीमांसीय बटन के खुलने से सिवाय कुछ शब्दों के और कुछ नहीं उजागर होता। और सोने पर सुहागा यह होता कि समाज पहले से ही इन शब्दों को जानता है; सो अंत में उसे जो मिलता है, वह एक नाम मात्र के अतिरिक्त कुछ और नहीं होता। लेकिन वहीं मंत्री का रहस्योद्घाटन सच में कुछ उजागर करता – जो होती पैसे की पोटली।

किसी अच्छे समाज में यह मानकर चला जाता है कि सभी लोग यह जानते हैं कि 'विचार' और 'अमूर्तन' क्या है; और हम निश्चित ही एक अच्छे समाज में हैं। प्रश्न बस इतना है कि कौन अमूर्त विचार करता है। जैसा कि

[3] यहाँ मूल जर्मन में जो शब्द प्रयोग हुआ है, वह "*hereingezäunselt*" है, जो एक स्वाबियाई शब्द है, जिसका प्रयोग सामान्य जर्मन में नहीं होता। मूल रूप से इसका सम्बन्ध "*zuan*" शब्द से है, जिसका सम्बन्ध "fence" से है; लेकिन यहाँ यह 'टोकरी-बुनाई' की भाषा से आया हुआ है, और इस संदर्श में इसका अर्थ 'किसी (वस्तु) में बुना हुआ,' जैसे कोई धागा किसी कपडे में या कोई फीता बालों में बना हुआ होता है। मैं इस जानकारी के लिए अपनी मित्र इज़ा जैकब्स का आभारी हूँ।

पहले ही बताया जा चुका है, हमारी मंशा समाज और इन चीज़ों के बीच तालमेल बिठाना नहीं है, न ही उससे यह अपेक्षा करना है कि वह ऐसे कठिन विषयों से जूझे, या फिर उसकी अंतरात्मा से अपील की जाए कि वह ऐसी चीज़ें, जो तार्किक प्राणियों के बीच स्थान और प्रतिष्ठा रखते हैं, उनकी उपेक्षा न करे। मेरी मंशा बस इस सुन्दर दुनिया को स्वयं उससे ही मिलवाना है, हालाँकि उसकी इस उपेक्षा के प्रति कोई दुर्भावना नहीं है। बल्कि कहीं गहरे में, समाज अमूर्त विचार को महान समझकर उसके प्रति आदर रखता है, और वह उससे मुँह इसलिए नहीं फेरता क्योंकि वह उसके अमूर्त विचार को तुच्छ समझता है, बल्कि इसलिए क्योंकि वह उसे उच्च समझता है; इसलिए नहीं कि उसे बहुत औसत समझता हो, बल्कि इसलिए कि उसे बहुत महान समझता है; या फिर यह कह सकते हैं कि एक अलग ही प्रकार की चीज़ है। यह नये कपड़ों जैसी कोई वस्तु नहीं प्रतीत होती, जो किसी को आम समाज में विशिष्ट बनाती हो; बल्कि कुछ ऐसा है जो किसी को समाज से बाहर कर देता है या उसका मज़ाक बना देता है, जैसे फटे पुराने कपड़े या मणियों से सुसज्जित कढ़ाई किये हुए कपड़ों में कोई अमीर व्यक्ति, जो विचित्र विदेशी[4] जैसा लगने लगे और समाज में उपहास का पात्र बन जाए या उससे बहिष्कृत कर दिया जाए।

तो कौन अमूर्त विचार करता है? अशिक्षित, न कि शिक्षित। अच्छा समाज अमूर्त विचार नहीं करता, क्योंकि यह बहुत सरल है, बहुत तुच्छ है (उसके बाहरी ओहदे की बात न करते हुए) — कुलीनता के किसी ऐसे थोथे दिखावे के कारण नहीं, जो स्वयं को उस चीज़ से ऊँचा दिखाता है जिसे वह करने में सक्षम नहीं है, बल्कि इसलिए क्योंकि वह वस्तु ही आंतरिक रूप से तुच्छ है।

अमूर्त विचार के प्रति पूर्वाग्रह और आदर इतना अधिक है कि संवेदनशील नाक वाले लोगों को अब तक किसी व्यंग्य की गंध आ गयी होगी; लेकिन चूँकि वे सुबह समाचार पत्र पढ़ते हैं, इसलिए उन्हें पता होगा कि व्यंग्य लिखने के लिए अलग पुरस्कार मिलता है, और अगर मुझे यही करना होता, तो बेहतर होता मैं वहाँ लिखकर शीघ्र ही अपना पुरस्कार प्राप्त करता।

मुझे अपनी प्रस्थापना के लिए यहाँ बस उदाहरण देने होंगे — और सब मेरी बात से सहमत होंगे। किसी हत्यारे को फँसी के फंदे पर ले जाया जा रहा है। सामान्य जनता के लिए वह एक हत्यारे के सिवा कुछ भी नहीं है। शायद स्त्रियाँ यह बोलें कि वह शक्तिशाली, सुन्दर और आकर्षक पुरुष है। सामान्य जनता को यह बात भयानक लगती है — क्या? एक सुन्दर हत्यारा? किसी के मन में ऐसा निकृष्ट विचार आ भी कैसे सकता है कि किसी हत्यारे को सुन्दर बोले; निश्चित तुम भी वैसे ही होगे! कोई पादरी, चूँकि वह संसार और मानव हृदय के गूढ़ रहस्यों से परिचित है, यह कह सकता है कि यह उच्च वर्गों के बीच फैला नैतिक पतन है।

[4] यहाँ हेगेल “quasi-Chinese" (अर्ध-चीनी/चीनी जैसा) लिखते हैं, जिसका प्रयोग, संभवतः अपमानजनक लक्ष्यार्थ के साथ, वे “विचित्र विदेशी व अप्रचलित" के पर्यायवाची के रूप में करते हैं।

जो लोगों को समझता है, वह अपराधी के मानस के विकास की पड़ताल करता है: वह उसके इतिहास में, उसकी शिक्षा में, उसके माता-पिता के बीच के ख़राब पारिवारिक सम्बन्ध पाता है; वह यह पाता है कि किसी छोटे-से दोष के लिए इस व्यक्ति को बहुत कठोर दंड मिला है, जिसके चलते वह पूरे सामाजिक व्यवस्था के विरुद्ध हो गया होगा — इस परिस्थिति में उसकी पहली प्रतिक्रिया ने उसे समाज से बाहर कर दिया, और अपराध के बिना उसका जीना असंभव कर दिया। यह सुनने पर कुछ लोग ऐसा भी कह सकते हैं कि यह इस हत्यारे को दंडमुक्त या पापमुक्त करना चाहता है! मुझे याद है, कैसे मेरी किशोरावस्था में एक मेयर इस बात पर विलाप कर रहा था कि पुस्तकों के लेखक बहुत आगे जा रहे हैं, और ईसाईयत और नैतिकता को जड़ से समाप्त कर देना चाहते हैं; किसी ने आत्महत्या के पक्ष में लिखा था; भयंकर, घोर भयंकर! थोड़ी जांच-पड़ताल करने पर यह पता चला कि यह हमला गोएथे की रचना *द सफरिंग्स ऑव वर्थर*[5] पर था।

यही है अमूर्त विचार: इस अमूर्त तथ्य के सिवाय कुछ न देखना कि वह एक हत्यारा है, और उसके अन्य समस्त मानवीय सार को इस सरल गुण में अपचयित कर देना।

यही कार्य भावुक, परिष्कृत समाज – लीपज़िग[6] में – काफ़ी अलग ढंग से होता है। वहाँ वे उस पहिये और उस पहिये से बँधे अपराधी पर फूल बरसाते हैं। लेकिन यह फिर से अमूर्तन ही है, हालाँकि विपरीत ढंग से। हो सकता है कि ईसाई रोज़िक्रूसियनपंथ, या यूँ कहें कि सूली-गुलाबवाद,[7] के साथ खिलवाड़ करें, और सूली पर गुलाब लगा दें। सूली फाँसी का वह तख्ता और पहिया है जो बहुत पहले पवित्र हो गया है। इसने अपमानजनक दंड होने का एकपक्षीय महत्त्व खो दिया है, और, पूर्णतः विपरीत, उच्चतम पीड़ा और गहनतम त्याग के साथ-साथ महानतम आनंद और दिव्य आदर का प्रतीक बन गया है। वहीं दूसरी ओर लीपज़िग में, फूल-पत्तियों से सुसज्जित पहिया, कोत्ज़ेबू[8] की भाँति, एक समझौता है, जैसे भावुकता और अशुभ के बीच एक फूहड़ सामाजिकता हो।

एक बार मैंने एक अस्पताल में एक सामान्य बूढ़ी स्त्री को एक अलग ढंग से हत्यारे के इस अमूर्तन की हत्या करते और उसे सम्मान का जीवन देते देखा था। हत्यारे का कटा हुआ सर तख्ते पर रख दिया गया था और सूर्य चमक रहा था। यह देखकर उस बूढ़ी औरत ने कहा, “ईश्वर की कृपा का सूर्य कितनी सुंदरता से उसके सर पर चमक रहा है!” “तुम इस प्रकाश के योग्य नहीं हो,” कोई और उस दुष्ट, जिससे वह गुस्सा है, से कहता

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[5] *द सफरिंग्स ऑव वर्थर* (*The Sufferings of Werther*) जर्मन कवि व कथाकार गोएथे का उपन्यास है, जिसमें आत्महत्या क वर्णन है, जो 1774 में प्रकाशन के बाद जितना प्रभावशाली उतना ही विवादस्पद भी था।

[6] जर्मनी का एक शहर।

[7] रोज़िक्रूसियनपंथ 17वीं शताब्दी का एक आध्यात्मिक और सांस्कृतिक आंदोलन था, जो जर्मनी में शुरू हुआ था। इनका प्रतीकचिन्ह पारम्परिक ईसाई सूली पर गुलाब का फूल था।

[8] कोत्ज़ेबू (1761-1819) एक जर्मन नाटककार था, जिसके प्रति, ऐसा प्रतीत होता है, हेगेल आलोचनात्मक मत रखते थे।

है। उस स्त्री ने देखा था कि सूर्य का प्रकाश उस हत्यारे के सर पर पड़ रहा था, जिसका अर्थ यह था कि वह अब भी उसके योग्य है। उसने उस सर को तख्ते के दंड से उठाकर ईश्वर की प्रकाशमयी शोभा में रख दिया, और उसका फूल-पत्तों और भावुक आत्म-तुष्टि से मेल कराने के बजाय, उसे उच्चतर सूर्य की शोभा में स्वीकार होते हुए देखा।

"बूढ़ी स्त्री, तुम्हारे अण्डे सड़े हुए हैं!" नौकरानी दुकानकार स्त्री से कहती है। "क्या?" वह उत्तर देती है, "मेरे अण्डे सड़े हुए हैं? तुम सड़ी हुई होगी! तुम मेरे अण्डों के बारे में यह कहती हो? तुम? क्या तुम्हारे बाप को सड़कों पर जुओं ने नहीं काट खाया था? क्या तुम्हारी माँ उस फ्रांसीसी के साथ नहीं भाग गयी थी? और क्या तुम्हारी दादी एक सरकारी अस्पताल में नहीं मर गयी थी? उसको पहले उस फटे पुराने दुपट्टे की जगह एक कमीज़ लेने दो; सबको पता है उसको यह दुपट्टे और टोपियाँ कहाँ से मिलती हैं: अगर उन अफसरों की सेवा न कर रही होतीं, तो आजकल बहुत-सी औरतें ऐसे सज-संवर के न घूम रही होतीं, और अगर इनकी मालकिनों ने घरबार पर और ध्यान दिया होता, तो बहुत-सी आज जेल में होतीं। उसको पहले अपने सलवार की छेद सिलने दो, फिर बात करना!" संक्षेप में, वह कोई भी दांव नहीं छोड़ती। वह अमूर्त विचार करती है, और दूसरी स्त्री – उसका दुपट्टा, टोपी, कमीज़, इत्यादि, और उसकी उँगलियाँ व उसके अन्य अंग, और उसके पिता और यहाँ तक की उसका पूरा परिवार भी – को एकमात्र इस अपराध, कि उसको अण्डे सड़े हुए लगे, के अधीन कर देती है। उसके लिए समस्त ही इन सड़े हुए अण्डों से पूरी तरह रंग गया है, वहीं उन अफसरों, जिनकी बात स्वयं इस स्त्री ने की—हालाँकि इस बात की सच्चाई पर गंभीर संदेह किया जा सकता है—के लिए स्थिति काफी भिन्न रही होगी।

अब नौकरानी से अगर हम नौकर पर आएँ, तो उस नौकर से बदतर कोई और नहीं है, जिसका मालिक निम्न वर्ग और निम्न आय वाला है; और वह उतनी ही बेहतर अवस्था में होगा जितना बेहतर उसका मालिक होगा। साधारण व्यक्ति यहाँ और अधिक अमूर्त विचार करता है: वह स्वयं को नौकर की तुलना में कुलीन समझता है, और स्वयं को नौकर के सम्बन्ध में केवल मालिक के रूप देखता है; वह इस एकांगी विधेय दृष्टि से चिपका रहता है। फ्रांसीसियों के बीच नौकर उच्चतम अवस्था में रहते हैं। एक सामान्य कुलीनजन केवल अपने नौकर से परिचित होता है, लेकिन एक फ्रांसीसी के लिए उसका नौकर उसका मित्र है। जब वह अकेले होते हैं, तब नौकर बात करता है: इसका उदाहरण दिदेरो का [उपन्यास] *जैक्स और उसका मालिक*[9] है; मालिक कुछ नहीं बस मज़े करता है, और समय काटता है, और बाक़ी सब नौकर को करने देता है। उसको ज्ञात है कि नौकर केवल नौकर नहीं है, पर एक व्यक्ति है जो शहर, लड़कियों, इत्यादि के बारे में जानकारी रखता है, और समझदार सुझाव भी दे सकता है; मालिक उससे इन विषयों के बारे में पूछता है, और नौकर को जो भी पता होता है, वह बताता भी है। एक फ्रांसीसी मालिक के यहाँ नौकर केवल यही नहीं कर सकता है; बल्कि वह

[9] फ्रांसीसी दार्शनिक व साहित्यकार देनिस दिदेरो का उपन्यास *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (*Jacques the Fatalist and his Master*)। हेगेल यहाँ *Jacques et son maître* (*Jacques and His Master*) लिखते हैं।

किसी विषय पर चर्चा भी शुरू कर सकता है, अपने स्वतंत्र मत भी रख सकता है, और उन पर दृढ़ भी रह सकता है; और जब मालिक को कुछ चाहिए हो, तो वह मात्र आज्ञा देकर नहीं, बल्कि बहस करके और नौकर को अपनी राय से सहमत करने के बाद ही करा सकता है। इस सब में यह ध्यान रखते हुए कि उसका मत तार्किक है, इसलिए मानने योग्य है।

सेना में भी हमें यही अंतर देखने को मिलता है। ऑस्ट्रिया में एक सैनिक को पीटा जा सकता है; मानो वह नीच है; क्योंकि जिस किसी के पास भी पीटे जाने का 'निष्क्रिय अधिकार' है, वह नीच है। इसलिए एक सामान्य सैनिक, एक अफसर के लिए इस पीटे जा सकने वाले व्यक्ति के अमूर्तन के अतिरिक्त कुछ भी नहीं है। इस समस्या [अमूर्त सैनिक] के साथ एक वर्दी और बेल्ट वाले अफसर को जूझना पड़ता है – और यह काम किसी से शैतान के साथ भी संधि करवा सकता है।

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Leaves of Empire: Colonial Legacies and the Making of Assam Tea

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This paper explores the origin and development of the tea industry in Assam, with a particular focus on ecological factors such as the region's humid climate, fertile soils, and abundant rainfall that facilitated the large-scale expansion of tea cultivation and its impact on the region's landscape. While this paper primarily relies on secondary sources, it acknowledges that such sources are firmly rooted in archival records, providing foundational data and narratives that underpin secondary scholarship. Estate records, tea committee reports, and historical accounts preserved in archives have enabled scholars like Pradip Baruah and Harold H. Mann to construct detailed interpretations of Assam's tea industry. For instance, the Assam State Archives which house colonial records dating from the 1770s onwards, contain extremely significant and rare primary documents pertaining to the tea plantations of Assam. These rare documents provide crucial insights into the environmental and social contexts of plantation economies. Ultimately, the idea is to demonstrate how secondary scholarship is produced with the aid of archival records through the reconstruction of the region's rich tea heritage and history.

Keywords: *Camellia assamica*, East India Company, Tea Research Association, Tea estates.

Introduction

The tea industry is one of India's oldest organised industries, involving a network of producers, distributors, exporters, and employees. It has played a vital role in the nation's economic development. Producing the majority of India's premium tea, Assam's tea industry merits close examination. According to Pradip Baruah, the term "Assam" has become synonymous with the world's finest black tea.[1]

Acknowledgements: I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr Preeti, under whom I studied the course on Global Ecological Histories during my undergraduate studies. Her rigorous teaching and critical insights not only broadened my understanding of environmental history but also encouraged me to undertake research on the tea plantations of Assam, the region where I was born and raised. This paper has greatly benefited from the intellectual foundation laid in her course and from her encouragement to engage with the

The origin of tea plantations in Assam can be traced back to 1823, when English infantry officer Robert Bruce first discovered tea plants growing in wild conditions in Upper Assam. The East India Company subsequently expanded the tea trade in Assam, which was previously monopolised by the Chinese. The British Empire had previously relied heavily on China to meet its tea requirements, but following the discovery of indigenous tea plants in Assam, large-scale cultivation was introduced in the region by the East India Company. The systematic cultivation of Assam's very own variety of the tea plant—*Camellia assamica*[2]—soon developed into a profitable enterprise, thereby reducing Britain's dependence on Chinese imports.[3] In 1832, a Tea Committee was established in Calcutta to assess the prospects of tea cultivation in Assam. Based on its findings, the East India Company, in conjunction with the Board of Control and the Tea Committee, determined that tea production and manufacture should be undertaken as a "private adventure."[4] This decision culminated in the formation of the Assam Company in England in 1839, with an initial capital investment of five lakhs.[5]

Historical developments, such as Robert Bruce's discovery of indigenous tea in Assam and the subsequent establishment of large-scale plantations, are documented in archival records. These records inform secondary sources, allowing authors like Baruah to provide coherent narratives of Assam's tea industry and its socio-economic impact. Secondary sources analyse these developments using archival records like Tea Committee reports, plantation ledgers, and correspondence, which provide insights into the strategies and decisions of colonial administrators and plantation managers.

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subject more deeply. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to my father, Mr Jyotirmoi Kakati, whose constant support, encouragement, and belief in the importance of academic pursuits have been invaluable to my intellectual growth. His guidance and unwavering commitment to my education have provided the foundation upon which this work rests.

[1] Pradip Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development* (Guwahati: Eastern Book House Publishers, 2008), v-vi.

[2] *Camellia sinensis var. assamica* is the scientific term of the indigenous tea plant grown in Assam.

[3] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati, Age 56 years (Senior Manager, Dejoo Tea Estate, Assam), November 12, 2023.

[4] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, v.

[5] Ibid.

A closer examination of the secondary literature shows that several influential works draw upon archival materials to construct their interpretations. Pradip Baruah's *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development* makes extensive use of East India Company records, Assam Company correspondence, early Tea Committee minutes, and plantation files to reconstruct the discovery of *Camellia assamica*, the establishment of the Tea Committee, and the evolution of labour and management systems. Similarly, Harold H. Mann's *Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India* (1918) utilises early plantation reports, government proceedings, Calcutta Tea Committee papers, and Assam Company letter-books, providing documentary-based narratives of Assam's tea industry. The commemorative volume *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association: 125 Years On* (2016) presents archival circulars, minutes, administrative documents, photographs, and press reports from the 19th and 20th centuries, offering insights into institutional decision-making within the industry. However, it does not fall within the category of profound interpretative scholarship. Even early works, including M. Sadir's 1913 article *The Tea Industry in Assam,* relies on government statistics and early planters' records to describe the condition of the industry by giving primary statistical insight into labour, cultivation, and output.

By relying on these scholarly works, this paper examines the historical trajectory of tea cultivation in Assam, the ecological conditions that enabled its expansion, and the socio-economic and environmental impact of plantations. Highlighting the role of archival evidence in informing secondary sources reinforces the understanding that our historical knowledge of Assam's tea industry is shaped jointly by preserved records and scholarly interpretations.

Assam's Tea Industry: Historical Origins and Developments

Although credit for the discovery of tea in Assam is widely attributed to Major Robert Bruce, he was not the only one who deserves recognition for the establishment of this lucrative enterprise. One must emphasise the vital role played by Maniram Dutta Baruah, better known as Maniram Dewan, and the Singpho. The paper attempts to specifically explore the beginnings of the tea industry in Assam, while highlighting the roles of significant figures who contributed to its establishment.

The British had previously attempted tea cultivation in India, most notably in 1780, using tea seedlings smuggled from China by Robert Kyd, a Scottish army officer of the East India Company. Kyd was deeply interested in botany and the introduction of economically valuable plants to India. However, these early efforts were unsuccessful.[6] Unbeknownst to them, tea was already growing wild in Assam, and the Singpho community, one of the region's prominent ethnic groups, had long consumed tea in the form of *Phalap*,[7] and were familiar with its medicinal properties. Their traditional knowledge facilitated Bruce's introduction to Assam's indigenous tea plants through the guidance of Maniram Dewan and the Singpho Chief, Bissa Gaum.[8] During his visit to Rangpur in 1823, Maniram Dewan, an intelligent young Assamese aristocrat, first drew Bruce's attention to the tea plant, while Bissa Gaum aided in gaining access to tea plants and seeds. Another Singpho Chief prepared 35 of the 130 chests of tea that C.A. Bruce (Robert Bruce's brother) had shipped to Calcutta in 1841. Therefore, the contribution of Assam's Singpho tribe in bringing the local plant to the attention of the outside world cannot be overlooked.[9] Furthermore, Maniram Dewan's pioneering efforts inspired many others, mostly Assamese tea entrepreneurs like Jagannath Barooah and Janaki Devi Barthakur, who came forward to establish tea plantations.[10]

In examining these early developments, Pradip Baruah offers a more nuanced interpretation that is grounded in documentary evidence. In *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development*, Baruah highlights the indigenous knowledge of the Singpho tribe, and Maniram Dewan as instrumental in drawing British attention to Assam's indigenous variety of the tea plant. Drawing on memorials and petitions submitted by Maniram Dewan to Company officials, Baruah emphasises that the indigenous people of Assam had identified and used Assam's native tea plant long before British scientific explorations and commercial cultivation commenced. By foregrounding these documents as

[6] Bhaskarjyoti Chakravarty and Hemanta Chakravarty, "Two Centuries of Assam Tea Discovery: Indian Tea Industry's Growth and Present State," *International Journal of Business and Management Invention* 12, no. 8 (2023): 99-100.

[7] *Phalap* is the traditional tea prepared by the Singpho community and is often described as the tribe's indigenous form of tea.

[8] Chakravarty and Chakravarty, "Two Centuries of Assam Tea Discovery," 100.

[9] D.N. Barua, *Science and Practice in Tea Culture* (Jorhat: Tea Research Association, 1989), 509.

[10] Chakravarty and Chakravarty, "Two Centuries of Assam Tea Discovery," 100.

primary evidence, Baruah challenges narratives that attribute discovery solely to British initiative and, instead, highlights the contribution of indigenous communities such as the Singphos in shaping the initial development of Assam's tea industry.[11]

Following the discovery, Bruce established an experimental tea nursery at Sadia. After his untimely death in 1824, his brother C.A. Bruce successfully cultivated the plants, laying the foundation for commercial tea plantations. The British administration formalised their efforts through the formation of the Tea Committee and a Scientific Deputation, which assessed Assam's suitability for large-scale tea cultivation and their reports, which are preserved in historical archives, provide detailed assessments of the region's potential for tea cultivation.[12] Given Britain's determination to challenge China's monopoly over tea, the discovery that Assam's soil and climate were highly conducive to the cultivation of tea assumed considerable strategic and economic significance.[13]

The first commercial tea garden was established at Chabua in 1837, and Assam tea was shipped to England from 1838 onwards. The Assam Company, founded in 1839 with an initial capital of five lakhs, assumed control over British holdings and began organising tea production on a commercial scale. By 1852, under the management of George Williamson, the company began to experience prosperity.[14] Archival materials, such as colonial administrative documents preserved in repositories like the Assam State Archives, provide detailed evidence of these early developments. Scholars have drawn extensively on these records to reconstruct the sequence of events, the role of key figures, and the ecological and economic conditions that shaped the emergence of Assam's tea industry.

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[11] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 24-35.

[12] Harold H. Mann, *The Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India* (Kolkata: Bengal Economic Journal, 1918), 3-8.

[13] Roop Kumar Gogoi, ed., *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association 125 Years On: A Miscellaneous Collection from over the Years* (Guwahati: Assam Branch Indian Tea Association, 2016), 1-2.

[14] "About tea industries," Industries and Commerce, Government of Assam, accessed August 31, 2025, https://industries.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/about-tea-industries#main1.

Archival documents have also enabled historians to trace the evolution of management structures, labour policies, and plantation practices. The recruitment and management of labour, initially from China and later from Indian regions such as Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh through the Tea District Labour Supply Agency, are documented extensively in colonial administrative records, providing insights into the workforce dynamics that underpinned plantation growth.[15] In 1950, the last recruitment was made, and around 30,000 workers came to Assam.[16] Archival research illuminates how nearly half of Assam's labour force historically comprised women, highlighting gendered aspects of labour within the tea industry, which remain evident even today.[17] In the post-independence period, the tea industry in Assam, which had long been under British control, gradually transitioned into Indian hands, with prominent industrial houses such as the Birlas, Poddars, Khetans, and Tatas emerging as leading producers.[18]

Understanding the Rise of Large-Scale Tea Production in Assam

The success of Assam's tea plantations can largely be attributed to favourable climate and soil conditions. Archival surveys and historical agricultural records, although not used directly in this paper, have informed the secondary sources referenced throughout, providing quantitative and qualitative evidence about rainfall, temperature, and soil suitability.

Scholars such as Pradip Baruah draw on early agricultural reports, soil assessments, and the correspondence of Company officials to demonstrate how colonial administrators gradually recognised Assam's climatic suitability for tea cultivation. Baruah's use of administrative papers and early plantation experiments helps explain how environmental factors informed colonial decisions about large-scale tea production.[19] Similarly, Harold H. Mann worked through the early survey memoranda preserved in the *Agri-Horticultural Society of India's Transactions* (1836-37) to show that colonial

[15] M. Sadir, "The Tea Industry in Assam," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 61, no. 3177 (October 1913): 1022-1023.

[16] Gogoi, *Assam Branch Indian Tea Association 125 Years On*, 10-11.

[17] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 7.

[18] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[19] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 24-32.

botanists had already mapped Assam's temperature range, monsoon rhythm, and porous, flood-margin soils and came away convinced that upper Assam mirrored China's famous tea provinces. Their checklist of similarities, including valley shape, rainfall pattern, plant stations, and vegetation, bolstered confidence in the potential of Assam as a viable commercial tea-producing region.[20]

Assam's humid climate has long been recognised as highly favourable for tea cultivation, as the crop requires a moderately hot and moist environment. Climatic conditions such as temperature, humidity, day length, sunlight, and precipitation directly influence the quality, yield, and distribution of tea. In particular, the steady productivity of tea throughout the season depended on the timely and even distribution of rainfall, while optimum temperatures, generally between 28–32°C, were essential for ensuring good yields. Similarly, soil quality was a decisive factor–tea thrived on well-drained, fertile, acidic soils, often located in elevated terrain with adequate depth.[21]

In addition to ecological suitability, colonial Assam offered abundant land and a relatively sparse population, conditions that facilitated large-scale plantation agriculture under British rule.[22] The colonial administration also invested in basic infrastructure to sustain plantation operations, ensuring connectivity, supply chains, and labour organisation systems. Workers were provided with subsidised food staples such as wheat and rice to maintain morale, while annual productivity bonuses served as incentives.[23] British planters also implemented systematic quality control measures, including cyclic pruning of tea bushes during the winter months to maximise output.[24]

Again, the reconstruction of these factors by scholars largely rests on evidence preserved in colonial records. Such archival materials have provided the essential foundation for tracing and interpreting the ways in which environmental conditions, social structures, and administrative policies

[20] Mann, *The Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India,* 5-11.

[21] "Tea Cultivation," Tocklai: Tea Research Association, accessed September 23, 2025, https://www.tocklai.org/tea-cultivation/.

[22] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Interview with Ankur Barooah, Age 42 years (Deputy Manager, Dejoo Tea Estate, Assam), November 19, 2024.

collectively shaped the emergence, consolidation, and eventual expansion of Assam's tea industry.

Environmental Transformations and Socio-Economic Contributions

Tea cultivation has profoundly shaped the landscape of Assam, leaving visible marks both in its historical trajectory, and in contemporary times. Archival documents such as estate surveys and administrative reports provide the factual basis for secondary sources that discuss deforestation, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss. The secondary sources cited in this paper draw upon such archival materials to explain the environmental consequences of monoculture plantations and chemical use, while also highlighting the evolving practices in sustainable cultivation. The expansion of large-scale plantations required vast tracts of land to be converted exclusively for the production of tea, a process that drastically altered the region's ecological balance.

The clearing of indigenous forests and natural vegetation led to widespread deforestation and the destruction of habitats for many native species. As a result, biodiversity loss became one of the most pronounced consequences of plantation agriculture. Alongside deforestation, the heavy reliance on chemical inputs is noted in colonial estate reports and later scientific surveys. The use of inorganic fertilisers, pesticides, and herbicides not only disrupted soil composition by rendering it highly acidic through substances such as urea, muriate of potash, and rock phosphate, but also contributed to the contamination of surrounding water bodies.[25] Intensive monoculture, combined with unsystematic land management, accelerated soil erosion and the depletion of organic matter, undermining long-term fertility.[26] Records of estate management further document how declining fertility prompted increased dependence on agrochemicals, which in turn deepened environmental degradation.

In this context, Pradip Baruah's work offers one of the most detailed archival-based analyses of the long-term problems and prospects faced by the tea

[25] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[26] Sanne van der Wal, *Sustainability Issues in the Tea Sector: A Comparative Analysis of Six Leading Producing Countries* (Amsterdam: Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen, 2008), 37-38.

industry in Assam. Baruah demonstrates that many of the environmental and socio-economic challenges confronting the industry, such as soil exhaustion, declining yields, labour shortages, and market fluctuations, were already visible in nineteenth-century plantation records.[27] His analysis shows that concerns about soil degradation, erosion, and the limits of monoculture were regularly recorded in estate management documents, while administrative correspondence reveals early anxieties regarding the financial sustainability of plantations.

While environmental impacts are evident, the tea industry also played a formative socio-economic role in the creation of infrastructure, employment for a large number of men and women, and provided support to local communities. Secondary sources interpret archival data to provide a broader view of the tea industry's significance for Assam's society and economy. Therefore, it is equally important to acknowledge the beneficial impact of establishing tea plantations in Assam. Stakeholders often emphasise that the sector functions as a "green industry," as plantations help preserve large tracts of land from urbanisation and maintain significant vegetation cover.[28] These estates serve as green spaces, mitigating pollution and contributing to the ecological balance of the region. Areas unsuitable for tea cultivation are frequently left under forest cover, while low-lying zones are developed into natural water bodies or maintained alongside existing ones to support the local microclimate.[29]

Beyond ecological considerations, the expansion of tea plantations has spurred the development of essential infrastructure in remote areas, including roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and worker housing, thereby enhancing accessibility and regional development. The tea industry also plays a pivotal role in Assam's economy by employing a substantial segment of the population, with women forming a significant proportion of the labour force.[30]

On an international scale, Assam tea is widely celebrated for its high quality and distinctive flavour, helping strengthen India's foreign exchange earnings

[27] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 227–241.
[28] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.
[29] Interview with Ankur Barooah.
[30] Baruah, *The Tea Industry of Assam*, 7.

and bolster trade relations. Thus, the export of Assam tea not only enhances the economic profile of the region but also integrates it into global markets, reflecting the broader socio-economic significance of the industry. In his work, Baruah notes that tea emerged as a major source of state income from the late nineteenth century onwards, contributing substantially to Assam's fiscal structure.[31]

Contemporary Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

While earlier phases of the tea industry were shaped by colonial ecological transformations, the most urgent challenge today is climate change, which has reshaped the dynamics of tea cultivation. In recent decades, climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges to the sustainability of tea cultivation in Assam.[32] While the sector experienced what has often been described as its "golden era" up to the 1980s, the last four decades have witnessed a gradual decline in both yield and quality.[33] Much of this deterioration has been attributed to the growing challenges posed by climate change, including rising temperatures, irregular rainfall patterns, increased frequencies of floods and even drought-like conditions due to significant rainfall deficits during winters, all of which have emerged as critical threats to Assam's tea landscape.

Secondary scholarship drawing on meteorological datasets, plantation-level productivity records, and scientific research demonstrates that rising temperatures and erratic rainfall have directly affected crop yield and quality. Recent summers with extreme temperatures, often surpassing 40°C, have severely reduced yields. Erratic precipitation has further aggravated the situation. Excessive levels of rainfall between June and September often cause waterlogging and soil erosion, whereas the winter months of November to March receive markedly reduced rainfall compared to earlier times.[34]

[31] Ibid., 207.

[32] Rishiraj Dutta, "Climate change and its impact on tea in Northeast India," *Journal of Water and Climate Change* 5, no. 4 (December 2014): 625–632.

[33] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[34] Tocklai: Tea Research Association, "Tea Cultivation."

Although sprinkler irrigation has been adopted to offset winter dryness, it remains a costly intervention, contributing to rising production expenses.[35]

These adverse climatic conditions have also intensified pest infestations, with species such as *Helopeltis* and loopers inflicting extensive crop damage. Compounding the problem, repeated chemical use has fostered pest resistance, while restrictions on pesticides under Maximum Residue Limit (MRL) regulations have narrowed the options available to planters. Similarly, invasive weeds, which now account for an estimated 5–15% of crop losses, present additional challenges. Species such as crabgrass resist conventional herbicides, while creepers like *Mikania* often overwhelm tea bushes, necessitating costly manual clearance.[36] Together, these factors have led to escalating pest-control and labour costs, creating a dual burden of reduced crop output and rising pest control and labour costs. Hence, it would not be wrong to say that the future of the tea industry seems grim.

However, reforms were gradually introduced in tea cultivation to mitigate these challenges. Some tea estates began experimenting with organic fertilisers such as vermicompost and cattle by-products, while also initiating reforestation and water conservation practices. However, the dangers of completely forsaking inorganic fertilisers cannot be ignored, as illustrated by the 2021 crisis in Sri Lanka, where an abrupt transition to organic farming resulted in significant reductions in yield and employment.[37] In Assam, therefore, planters follow a balanced model that emphasises organic methods without fully discarding inorganic supplements. Moreover, one cannot ignore the growing significance of indigenous technical knowledge, which is widely applied by plantation workers and managers to reduce dependence on chemical inputs gradually.[38]

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[35] Interview with Ankur Barooah.

[36] Interview with Jyotimoi Kakati.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid. Local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society and that represents regional and traditional farming methods is known as indigenous technical knowledge. Over centuries, farmers have developed the ability to produce food in challenging conditions. These techniques support environmentally friendly farming and help to reduce production costs. For instance, using cow dung as fertilizer; in certain situations, some weeds can also be used to fight off particular pests.

While archival estate records provide evidence of plantation practices in the 19th century, contemporary reports by the Tea Research Association provide evidence of the scientific guidance offered to planters on matters such as soil erosion control, water management, and sustainable land-use practices. Post-independence developments are documented in reports published by the Tea Research Association, established in 1964. These reports serve as important sources for understanding modern scientific interventions, including soil management, pest control, and the gradual adoption of organic fertilisers and Indigenous Technical Knowledge across tea estates.[39] Together, these sources allow scholars to construct a comprehensive historical narrative, connecting colonial legacies with post-independence scientific and socio-economic developments in the region's tea industry.

In sum, archival records of past climatic fluctuations, alongside contemporary scientific data collected by meteorological stations and Tea Research Association laboratories, allow scholars to situate present vulnerabilities within a longer historical context. These records illuminate both the ecological disruptions caused by monocultural expansion and the continuing vulnerabilities posed by climate change, while also demonstrating how the industry has shaped social structures, infrastructure, and economic life in the region.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to trace the history and evolution of Assam's tea industry, demonstrating the profound role of ecological and socio-economic factors. While it is based on secondary sources, it is important to note that the paper has acknowledged the vital role of archival and historical records, which provide the essential evidence for constructing accurate and nuanced historical narratives.

The history of tea in Assam is deeply intertwined with economic policies of the colonial state, ecological conditions, and social transformations. From the early nineteenth-century discovery of *Camellia assamica* to the establishment of

[39] Eloise M. Biggs, Niladri Gupta, Sukanya D. Saikiad, and John M.A. Duncana, "The tea landscape of Assam: Multi-stakeholder insights into sustainable livelihoods under a changing climate," *Environmental Science and Policy* 82, (2018): 9-18.

organised plantations under the East India Company, and later the Assam Company, the tea industry was transformed into a symbol of British imperial enterprise and became the foundation for Assam's modern economy.

Tea cultivation reshaped Assam's physical and social landscape: it transformed forests into monoculture plantations, created large-scale labour migration, and contributed to both economic growth and cultural change. The industry provided infrastructure, employment, and global recognition to Assam, yet it also introduced environmental degradation, labour exploitation, and dependence on fluctuating global markets. Contemporary challenges such as climate change, erratic rainfall, pest resistance, and soil degradation reveal that the tea industry continues to face structural vulnerabilities that echo the ecological and economic dependencies of its colonial past. This study has made an effort to underscore not only the importance of understanding the origins and growth of the tea industry, but also the necessity of re-evaluating its future.

Ultimately, the story of Assam's tea is one of continuity and change, where colonial legacies intersect with modern sustainability concerns. The tea plantations of Assam remain an enduring reminder of how ecology, empire, and economy converge to shape regional histories, and how their legacy continues to inform contemporary debates on sustainability, labour, and heritage. Archival sources such as tea estate records, plantation ledgers, and correspondence underpin secondary analyses, offering a bridge between raw historical data and synthesised interpretations of the tea industry and its evolution since its inception. This illustrates the continued relevance of historical archives in reconstructing the state's economic, social, and ecological history. This paper has attempted to highlight its role in reconstructing the history of tea in Assam.

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Introduction

What narratives can the deteriorating and collapsing remnants of past industrial sites reveal? Once bustling hubs of mass work, these sites now exist as ruins, a silent archive of a vanished world. In what ways can we read these archival remnants? Maura Finkelstein contends that ruins ought not to be seen merely as symbols of loss, but instead should be read as traces that offer fresh perspectives on contemporary urban landscapes. Although the Dhanraj Textile Mill in Mumbai has been shut down for a long period, the book, *The Archive of Loss,* aims to reveal the stories that persist within the remnants of its ruins. In her book, Finkelstein provides a useful conceptual and methodological framework for examining these "living ruins" (p. 6).

Ruins have often been aestheticised as "privileged sites of reflection" and "icons of romantic loss" (p. 9).[1] Finkelstein, however, advances a critical conceptual shift from the notion of ruins to that of ruination, emphasising the latter's active and processual character. Rather than viewing ruins as static remnants of the past, she conceptualises "living ruination" to foreground the "ongoing, embodied, and material processes through which imperial and industrial debris continue to circulate across temporal and spatial registers" (p. 6). In this sense, ruination is not a condition of decay but a "dynamic process that redistributes the fragments of industrial and postindustrial life, linking disparate moments, sites, and bodies" (p. 20). This analytic framing—from ruins to ruination—opens a generative space for Finkelstein to study the

[1] Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 9. Also See, Gastón Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.

legacies of industrial capitalism and imperialism within the textures of contemporary urban existence.

In the book, Finkelstein employs an ethnographic method to examine the ruins of the Dhanraj Textile Mill. The ethnography reveals how the mill's remnants; its machines, former workers and their bodies, and their living quarters, all form a dispersed, multisensory archive. Finkelstein looks at these scattered traces to challenge traditional ways of understanding archives. She shows how ruins can help us understand the lasting connections between the materials and politics of life in post-industrial cities.

The Living Archive

At its peak in the early 1960s, the city's fifty-eight textile mills employed over 600,000 workers and played a crucial role in a global production network that supplied cloth to various parts of the world. Among these, the Dhanraj Textile Mill was a key player. Over time, the textile industry began to decline, particularly in the 1980s, primarily due to a decline in global textile demand. Moreover, the Great Textile Strike of 1982–83 had a severe impact on the entire industry and the operations of textile mills, such as Dhanraj. All this resulted in over 600 acres of the Dhanraj Textile Mill, situated at the heart of Mumbai, being underutilised.

Additionally, the colonial-era zoning laws had left the textile mill land issue unresolved, resulting in an urban planning deadlock. To make better use of the land, the state's 1991 Development Control Rule (DCR-58) proposed a one-third allocation of mill land for open space and low-income housing (p. 10-12). However, a legal dispute limited public access to the mill's land. In 2001, a new law favoured mill owners and reduced public access to just 6-10% of the total mill space. Local activists viewed this as a missed chance to improve Mumbai's population congestion problems and its lack of green spaces. By the early 2000s, mounting real estate prices and ongoing court cases had slowed any further redevelopment efforts.

Today, the Dhanraj Textile Mill is a good example of 'living ruination.' It is a space that is both neglected and functional, stuck between decay and 'latent vitality' (p. 14). For Finkelstein, the ruined building serves as an affective

reminder of how industrial remnants continue to influence the urban experience through unresolved material, legal, and emotional entanglements.

Locating the Vitality within the Ruins

One of the key methodological interventions Finkelstein makes in the book is her treatment of the archive as both an object and a method. She presents the archive as a living, 'ethnographically constructed assemblage' as opposed to a static repository of documents. To narrate the story of the ruins, Finkelstein develops a material-affective methodology that weaves together oral histories, spatial ethnography, photographs, and the persisting informal economies within the ruins of the mill. Alongside these materials and tangible remnants, she carefully includes sensory residues, such as pain, rumours, and embodied suffering, as legitimate archival matter. In doing so, she expands the epistemic limits of historical evidence by treating the affective and sensory residues as legible historical evidence. The result of this inclusion is a book that foregrounds absence, decay, and invisibility as constitutive elements of urban memory and historical knowledge production.

Apart from the introduction and epilogue, the book is organised into five separate chapters: The Archive of the Mill, The Archive of the Worker, The Archive of the Chawl, The Archive of the Strike, and The Archive of the Fire. Each chapter functions as a distinct yet interconnected site of inquiry into Dhanraj's afterlife beyond the mill's closure. In this book review, rather than summarising each chapter/archive, I focus on three material-affective registers that Finkelstein uses in her book to help us understand the story of Dhanraj Mill. These three registers are in the form of three chapters: the mill building ruins, the worker's body, and the chawl space. Together, these registers effectively illustrate the central themes of the book, which are living ruination and the vitality of the ruins.

In chapter 1, "The Archive of the Mill," Finkelstein answers the question of why the ruins are still alive, despite the structure of the mill being demolished. Here, she takes two intertwined yet contrasting narratives—the lived experiences of the mill workers and the narratives surrounding the mill land narrated throughout the city. These two different narratives reveal how absence is produced. Despite the official discourses rendering the mills empty,

this chapter demonstrates how these accounts overlook the labour, memories, and lives that continue to thrive within them. The juxtaposition of the narratives uncovers a "trail of industrial breadcrumbs that vitalises the abandoned stories of the mill" (p. 32). Through these narratives, she contests the processes of erasure that structure Mumbai's postindustrial transformation and reframes the mill as one of the sites of lively ruination rather than abandonment. The chapter reveals the absence of active social and economic worlds that are often obscured by dominant narratives.

Further, in her effort to trace what endures of Dhanraj, Finkelstein turns from the visible ruins of the mill to the invisible archives of the body, specifically to the former workers' accounts of endurance, pain, and persistence. In Chapter 2, "The Archive of the Workers," she shifts from the mill's ruins to fleshy ruins by locating the archive within the flesh of labouring bodies. Here, the worker's body becomes an embodied repository where decades of mechanised labour have left their marks as aches, scars, and habitual gestures. The workers have been turned into 'industrial cyborgs' (p. 63). Drawing heavily from feminist cyborg theory, Finkelstein conceptualises this corporeal archive as one carried under the skin, where history circulates through sensation, repetition, and muscular memory rather than textual documentation.[2] By attending to these sensory and material continuities between body, machine, and environment, Finkelstein uncovers a subtle, embodied historiography inscribed in the tissues and reflexes of those who continue to carry the industrial past within their bodies and everyday life.

Just as the embodied pain continued to haunt the mill workers, the chawl space where they lived and socialised continued to mark the landscape as enduring traces of the industrial past. In the chapter, "The Archive of the Chawl," Finkelstein delves into a suspended temporality through the 'living biographies' of the workers (p. 88). The chawls, she argues, function as an inhabited archive that stores the sensory memory of the industrial labour and collective existence. Through this, Finkelstein reveals how deindustrialisation produces temporal suspension rather than progress: the rhythms of labour, social ties, and built forms endure beyond the factory's end. Drawing on her

[2] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

notion of "queer time," she frames "chawl time" as an alternative temporality that resists the linear narrative of the modern, rapidly growing city (p. 94). By tracing these continuities, Finkelstein exposes the uneven temporalities of Mumbai's post-industrial transformation and challenges the linear idea of urban progress.

Across all the chapters, Finkelstein's core contribution is to help us "learn to see what remains" (p. 26). Her primary objective throughout the book is to identify "vital remnants in the perceived absence of the visible," uncovering a sense of vitality within the ruins (p. 188). As an ethnographer–archivist, she reads and discovers the multiple forms of archives not just to uncover history but to collide alternate times—linking Dhanraj Mill's industrial past with the dominant narratives of the city's present and planned futures—and alternate spaces, from the mill's quiet interiors to the metropolis's bustle.

An Affective Archive

Within the broader trajectory of her argument, Finkelstein reimagines the archive as extending beyond a collection of documents, encompassing affective and sensory registers. She does not ignore the ephemeral and the affective traces attached to the textile mill; instead, she considers them as vital, 'living forces,' capable of telling alternate stories of the urban landscape.[3] Such a work broadens the scope of historical inquiry and expands where archives may be located and how they can be interpreted.

Her anthropological approach to the archive goes beyond textual analysis by engaging with the sensory and affective dimensions of history. It understands the archive as a social and affective construction that continues to affect the individuals in the present in different forms. Within this view, the past does not end with the construction or closure of industrial sites, but endures in spaces and sensibilities that outlive physical decay.

While Finkelstein does make an essential contribution by expanding the scope of the archive through her anthropological approach, her method has

[3] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22. Here she describes the archive not as a neutral storehouse but as a charged force field shaped by colonial anxieties and affective registers.

limitations. Throughout her book, she engages with both the material and affective forms of archives. However, her traditional archives, such as mill ledgers, colonial documents, union reports, and municipal plans, remain primarily illustrative rather than systematically in conversation with the affective archive. Such a treatment limits deeper debates on industrial policies and urban changes, which further restricts the historical intervention in the matter. Nonetheless, the work would be helpful for students, especially those working in contexts where formal archives are scarce or fragmented.

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Kanika Singh. *The Story of a Sikh Museum: Heritage, Politics and Popular Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025, pp 226.

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The Story of a Sikh Museum: Heritage, Politics and Popular Culture, consisting of five chapters, is an incisive exploration into how a museum's affiliation with religious institutions constructs collective memory. Focusing on the Bhai Mati Das Museum, housed within the landscape of the Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib in Old Delhi, Kanika Singh examines the narratives that surround museums, objects of historical value, and visual culture, which shape the Sikh community's representations of its past. In doing so, she creates an analytical space that brings art history, community narratives, and museum studies together, while remaining attentive to the realities of faith and modernity.

The book begins by introducing the reader to the origins of the museum and its association with sacredness through a public exhibition. Visitors enter barefoot and with covered heads, just like one does in a gurdwara. Singh characterises these spaces as "devotional archives." Through interviews, fieldwork, and visual analysis of the exhibits, Singh offers an insider's account of the museum's form and examines how representation becomes a participatory act rather than a static display. Singh delves into the process of the paintings, which she characterises as "bazaar art," the manner in which they made their way into the museum, and how they were designed to engage with their viewers. The museum, in this context, not only invokes Sikh identity but also serves as a visual memorial for the martyrs, a site for political contestation, and a representation of the community's heritage.

The Punjab and Sind Bank became a proponent in defining Sikh visual memory as part of a larger process of art, heritage, identity, and political interlinkages (ch. 2). Between the 1970s and early 2000s, the Punjab and Sind Bank commissioned a series of paintings on Sikh history for its annual

calendars. These works, produced by artists trained in realism, were later donated to the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee and became part of the Bhai Mati Das Museum's collection. Interviews with artists reveal how visual conventions adhere to contemporary ideals of Sikhism, the Khalsa form, and the five symbols of faith, as well as historical accuracy, while developing "feelings" (p. 32) on a canvas for the viewer to not only observe the art but also connect with it personally. Even gestures that seem timeless, such as a Guru pointing heavenward, are shown to be modern inventions legitimised by contemporary devotional expectations, both in their choice of themes and their use of specific visual elements. These paintings, therefore, mark a decisive shift from regional miniatures to a visual language that is realist in form and style sensibility.

Each painting of the Sikh past is represented as a chosen theme, accompanied by an explanation in Punjabi, English, and sometimes Hindi. The language employed for these explanations, therefore, becomes crucial in understanding the objective of the paintings being commissioned: to instil Sikh ideals within the upcoming generation and to consolidate the past for the existing one to recollect and remember. Singh observes that the mode of representation employed at Bhai Mati Das simplifies the community's evolution into what it is today. The paintings depict the lives of the Gurus and martyrs in a linear historical narrative, characterised by traits of righteousness and advancing heroism. The omission of modern episodes, such as the Partition, reveals the limits of this visual theology, as indicated in the third chapter.

The fourth chapter, Sikh Heritage and Its Politics in Contemporary India, extends this analysis into the public sphere. It discusses the celebrated episode of Baghel Singh's conquest of Delhi in 1783, along with slogans of "Delhi Fateh" (p. 72) in farmers' protests, which have broader historical relevance to establishing one's own identity in the political narrative across time, using "visual othering" of a community, in this case, the Muslims, portrayed as antagonistic figures within specific narratives of Sikh history (p. 61). Singh demonstrates how museum imagery participates in everyday cultural production, transforming heritage into a visual language within contemporary political spheres. The chapter closes by asking why, if these narratives are already widely available, they are not more widely known.

The present work demonstrates a remarkable understanding of Sikh ideals and their application in the construction of Sikh history and the emerging Sikh museums. The work employs not only historical methodologies of oral narratives and visual art to inquire into the pre-existing narratives of museums, but also presents a new domain for the historical and archival study of Sikh history, opening an area of prospective research among historians in which one can employ these methods and use the present work to understand that narratives aren't always state-crafted. Instead, they are often oriented towards the formation of social ideals, identity and culture, especially in relation to communal histories. Sikh museums signal the community's continuing negotiation of identity within a nation striving to reconcile pluralism with unity. Singh traces the overlapping networks of patronage, religious committees, government bodies, and private donors that sustain these projects. Across these contexts, the museum serves as both a devotional archive and a statement of belonging in the realm of India's modern polity.

The Story of a Sikh Museum is, thus, more than just a study of a single institution. It delineates how art, faith, and politics converge to shape collective memory. Singh's meticulous fieldwork, evident in well-structured appendices and lucid analysis offered by the text, reveals that heritage in contemporary India is not a passive process but an active, contested one. The book's clarity and depth make it a significant contribution to the scholarship on South Asian visual culture, religious identity, and the politics of representation.

Audrey Truschke, *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Muslim Pasts*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2021, pp 354.

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Audrey Truschke's daunting endeavour of analysing outlandish Sanskrit texts, from the 1190s uptill 1721, dealing with Indo-Persian political events, parturiated her third book titled *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Muslim Pasts*. By focussing more on historiography rather than political history, Truschke claims her book to be one of a kind as it seeks, "for the first time, to collect, analyse and theorise Sanskrit histories of Muslim-led rule and, later, as Muslims became an integral part of the Indian cultural and political worlds, Indo-Muslim rule as a body of historical materials."[1]

The book is divided into seven chapters, each engaging with Sanskrit texts composed in distinct spatio-temporal contexts. Besides, the appendix of the book contains English translations of some selected Sanskrit histories discussed by the author in the preceding seven chapters. The first chapter of the book deals with Sanskrit epigraphs and other forms of texts from the 8th century CE, composed to mark Muslim presence in the subcontinent. Truschke has divided these Sanskrit materials into two groups: Sanskrit inscriptions in which religion did not serve as the marker of identity of allies or foes and seldom sought to otherise Muslims;[2] and 11th century esoteric Buddhist materials, part of the *Kalachakra* tradition, that described Islam negatively as a religion of violence (*himsadharma*) in order to justify its own existence. Truschke, through these two sets of examples, has concluded that such endeavours showcase how indigenous learned elite chose to selectively

[1] Audrey Truschke, *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Muslim Pasts* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd., 2021), xxii.

[2] Ibid., 5.

portray the Muslim community with respect to different contexts and for different audiences.[3]

Following Prithviraj Chauhan's (r. 1177-1192) defeat by Muiz ud-Din Ghori (r. 1173-1206) in 1192, the Ghurids introduced new languages (Persian, Turkish and Arabic), an 'unfamiliar' religion – Islam, and unfamiliar styles of rulership to the Indian subcontinent. In the second chapter, Truschke's narrative deals with how the Sanskrit intelligentsia of that era perceived such differences. By citing the reference of Jayanaka's *Pṛthvirajavijaya*, Truschke has pointed out that its author gives no indication of looking down upon the Ghurids due to their religious affiliation, and he was only concerned with the Ghurids' inability to speak Sanskrit, which reflected a major flaw.[4]

In the third chapter, Truschke has emphatically shed light on the phrase *Hindurayasuratrana*, which was used by Bukka[5] to proclaim himself as a sultan (*suratrana*) who stood out among Hindu kings (*hinduraya*). In this context, 'Hindu' does not denote a religious identity but rather a royal claim to authority, therefore the features defining these terminologies appear to be largely cultural, instead of religious.[6] Philip B. Wagoner situates this process of cultural change within a broader theoretical model of what he calls "Islamicisation," wherein indigenous elites boosted their political status and authority by engaging with the more "universal" culture of Islam, without compromising indigenous cultural traditions.[7] As far as the Muslim rulers were concerned, they were highly influenced by these cultural innovations and used the Sanskrit title *Hammira* for expressing their political ambitions. Truschke has cited examples of the coins of Muhammad Ghori (d. 1206) bearing, in Devanagari script, the Sanskrit titles *srihammira* and *srimad hammira* (Glorious *Hammira*). Delhi Sultan Iltutmish (r. 1210–36), too, issued coins proclaiming himself as *suratana srisamsadina* (Glorious Sultan Shamsuddin).[8]

[3] Ibid., 17.

[4] Ibid., 24-33.

[5] One of the founders of Vijayanagara Empire.

[6] Truschke, *Language of History,* 43-45.

[7] Philip B. Wagoner, ""Sultan among Hindu Kings": Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (1996): 853-854.

[8] Truschke, *Language of History,* 46.

Shifting her focus onto two literary sources, Gangadevi's *Madhuravijaya* (c. 1380)[9] and Nayachandra's *Hammiramahakavya* (c.1410),[10] Truschke has shown how both these texts articulate the victory of a 'Hindu' power over a 'Muslim' one, and vice versa, in a contrasting manner. However, in both these cases, there is a discernible anxiety to connect with the recent past for claiming political legitimacy.[11]

In the fourth chapter, Audrey Truschke has put forward a comparative analysis of two regional traditions belonging to the 14th and 15th centuries, respectively – Gujarati *Prabandhas* composed by Shvetambara Jains, and Kashmiri *Rajataranginis* composed by Kashmiri Brahmins. Truschke, through several examples, demonstrates how the composers of Jain *Prabandhas* did not intend to project Muslims as their primary foes, responsible for fomenting unfortunate circumstances in the prevailing political milieu.[12]

While defining the Kashmiri *Rajatangini* tradition, Truschke focuses on the works by Kalhana, Jonaraja and Shrivar composed in 1149, 1459, 1486 respectively. According to Truschke, Kalhana's endeavours do not reflect any intention of otherising the Muslims; Jonaraja's Muslim patron, Sultan Zain al-Abidin, was often praised as being superior to other rulers of Kashmir and was likened to Vishnu. Truschke argues that Jonaraja, therefore, employed the term '*mleccha*' to distinguish tyrannical kings from virtuous ones. Further, in Shrivar's narrative, Zain al-Abidin is identified as Shiva, and we also find a robust presence of Muslims.[13]

In the fifth chapter, Truschke has studied the texts on Jain-Mughal ties, authored by Jain monks from the *Tapa Gaccha* and the *Kharatara Gaccha*, two Shvetambara branches largely based in Gujarat. In their narratives, Jain

[9] This Sanskrit text deals with the overthrow of the Sultanate of Madurai in 1371 (Sultanate of Malabar according to Persian and Arabic sources) by Kumara Kampana, prince of the Vijayanagara Empire and son of Bukka I. The author, Gangadevi, was his wife.

[10] It narrates the history of the Chauhan dynasty's conflict with Muslim and Indo-Muslim rulers, leading to Hammira Chauhan's futile attempt(s) to resist Alauddin Khalji's assault on Ranthambore Fort in Rajasthan in 1301.

[11] R. Mahalakshmi, "Review Article," review of *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Muslim Pasts,* by Audrey Truschke. *Studies in People's History* 9, no. 1 (2022): 87.

[12] Truschke, *Language of History,* 83.

[13] Ibid., 86-107.

authors located the loci of Mughal imperial interest and Jain religious ideologies, both concurrently and interdependently. Truschke then draws our attention to Siddhichandra's *Bhanuchandraganicharita,* in which he equates Akbar with Rama, Krishna, Indra and other deities, followed by Jahangir whose activities are compared to that of Indra, in addition to Nur Jahan being compared to Lakshmi. Besides, Abul Fazl is represented as "a paradigm of Sanskrit learning."[14] Truschke takes note of Siddhichandra's ironical endeavour to project Jains as the "Mughal Other," and conversely, the Mughals as indistinguishable from traditional Indian kings. In her opinion, the *Bhanuchandraganicharita* is arguably the earliest Sanskrit text to focus primarily on cross-cultural interactions with Indo-Persian political elites. [15]

In the sixth chapter, Truschke discusses Rajput and Maratha Sanskrit histories, which reveal that the identities associated with 'Rajput' and 'Maratha' were not "timeless" but fluid, such that "they fought on all sides."[16] The author has attempted to investigate how this aspect of "fluid alliances" was received among the contemporary Sanskrit literati, for which she sought to study two texts parallelly, Chandrashekhara's *Surjanacharita* (composed in the 1590s in Benares) and Rudrakavi's *Rastraudhavamsamahakavya* (composed in 1596 in Baglan). The former text accepts the Mughals as the superior political counterpart with respect to its patron, and the author considers his patron's alliance with the Mughals as a positive development. The latter text is dedicated primarily to the exploits of its patron, Narayan Shah, the Baglan king in 1596, whose political affiliation(s) used to be quite fluid with no obsession for loyalty. Truschke then shifts her focus onto Sanskrit works composed for the Maratha Bhonsle clan - *Suryavamsa* (c. 1675), *Sambhurajacharita* (c. 1685) and *Rajaramacharita* (c. 1690), patronised by Shivaji (d. 1680), Sambhaji (r. 1680–89) and Rajaram (r. 1689–1700) respectively. She then shed light on two additional texts on Shivaji and Sambhaji - Jayarama's *Parnlaparvatagrahankhyna* and *Paramanandakavya* composed by Paramananda (or somebody using his name). Truschke has asserted that in such Maratha-sponsored histories, a strong sense of "Us versus Them" is often fostered such

[14] Ibid., 132-133.
[15] Ibid., 135.
[16] Ibid., 139.

that identities of "Us" and "Them" were carved out in relation to military and political terms.[17]

According to Truschke, this "textured vocabulary"[18] must not be analysed as something associated with the modern construct of Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, which had been in circulation since the mid-19th century, finding legitimate voice in the works of Jadunath Sarkar.[19] Sarkar, who projected Shivaji as "a new hope, the protector of Hindus and a saviour of Brahmans from the atrocities of Aurangzeb,"[20] set the stage for popular contestation orbiting around the Aurangzeb-Shivaji binary. Truschke has argued that the Maratha sponsored Sanskrit histories, and conversely, put forward a more nuanced understanding of the early modern ways of seeing the world.

In the seventh chapter, Truschke has undertaken the study of four texts: Padmasagara's *Jagadgurukavya*, a Sanskrit translation of part of Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* and Lakshmipati's pair of texts - *Nripatinitigarbhitavritta* and *Abdullacharita*.

Colonial historians like James Mill and Vincent Smith framed the medieval period as a dark age,[21] a characterisation that prompted secular scholars to put forward a counter-narrative which often downplayed the role of religion in public life, a tendency described by Neeladri Bhattacharya as the "predicament of secular history."[22] The author in discussion, Audrey Truschke, has also aligned herself with this secular approach over the years. It

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[17] Ibid., 155.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb,* vols. I–V (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar and Sons, 1912-1924), cited in Anas Zaman, "The Reign of Emperor Aurangzeb: Some Historiographical Considerations." MPhil Dissertation, Department of History, University of Delhi (2022): 90 (refer fn. 108).

[20] Quoted from Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb* Vol IV (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1919), 188 in Ibid., 91 (refer fn. 115).

[21] Ibid., 109. Also see, Cynthia Talbot, *Precolonial India in Practice: Society, Religion and Identity in Medieval Andhra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-2.

[22] Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Predicaments of Secular Histories." *Public Culture* 20, no. 1 (2008): 57-73, cited in Raziuddin Aquil, *History in the Public Domain* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2023), 25. Also see, Raziuddin Aquil, "Introduction: Early Modern Bengal" in *An Earthly Paradise: Trade, Politics and Culture in Early Modern Bengal*, eds. Raziuddin Aquil and Tilottama Mukherjee (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2019), 24-26.

is important to note that Hindu-Muslim identities emerged through mutual interaction, not isolation.[23] According to Cynthia Talbot, with the advent of the Muslims in South Asia, "a broader, more inclusive, Indic identity began to develop" among the non-Muslim inhabitants.[24] It is, therefore, necessary to deconstruct the modern understanding of Hindu-Muslim dichotomy and then reconstruct the history of Hindu-Muslim interactions with reference to the space and time they belong to. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence have argued for moving beyond narrow Hindu-Muslim categories by using broader terms like *Islamicate* and *Indic*, that reflect expansive worldviews rather than rigid religious groups.[25] Truschke's efforts appear to be less promising in this regard as she has preferred to limit herself strictly within the precincts of the Muslim-Non Muslim dichotomy in general, and the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy in particular, trying to blur boundaries between the two ethno-religio-cultural categories, and contribute generously to the broader scholarship on secular history. Although no scholarly work is beyond criticism, this book opens access to a thought-provoking archive of an "under-studied phase of Sanskrit literary history."[26]

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[23] Cynthia Talbot, "Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 4 (1995): 694.

[24] Ibid., 700.

[25] David Gilmartin and Bruce B Lawrence, "Introduction" in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, eds. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 1-2.

[26] Mahalakshmi, "Review Article," 91.

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> "She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing." (p. 4).

From the very beginning, Hosseini sets the stage for his audience by introducing them to an innocent child who instantly becomes the object of pity. The nine-year-old Mariam lives on the outskirts of Herat with her bitter mother (Nana), anxiously waiting for the once-a-week visits from her father (Jalil). Nana frequently uses the word '*harami*,' which serves as a reminder of her own shame and misfortune and to convey her animosity towards Mariam. At the same time, Mariam learns about the hollowness of her father's affection, where despite his weekly visits and displays of kindness, she and her mother live in a small shack (*kolba*), far away and at a safe distance from Jalil's main home, where he resides with his wives and their legitimate children. One day, when she decides to visit him, a visit he does not acknowledge, she returns home to find that her mother has hanged herself. Nana's untimely suicide scars Mariam's entire existence by exile, which goes beyond being a personal grief.

> "It did not occur to young Mariam to ponder the unfairness of apologizing for the manner of her own birth." (p. 11).

A fifteen-year-old Mariam hopes to find a home with Jalil, but he, influenced by his wives, arranges her marriage to Rasheed, a widowed shoemaker, who also happens to be her senior by almost twenty years. Her residence of marriage, typically idealised as a woman's domain, becomes a theatre of violence and the place where her mobility, voice, and fertility are constantly monitored. Rashid's initial interest in her is solely as a potential mother and housekeeper, and later uses Mariam's miscarriages (and infidelity) as an

excuse for his cruelty when she is unable to conceive a son. He subjects Mariam to regular beatings for minor infractions. When Mariam's cooking displeases him, he violently forces her to chew on pebbles, bloodying her mouth and breaking her teeth. Even when it comes to important life events like his desire to take a second wife, he forbids her from voicing any resistance or disagreement. Marriage, rather than solving Mariam's precarity relocates it, tightening its grip while offering an illusion of legitimacy.

Noted feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin describes in her 1988 book *The Bonds of Love*[1] why people put up with, and stay within, relationships of domination and submission. She contends that domination is a complex psychological process that entangles both participants in chains of complicity. Mariam's own constrained agency is mirrored in Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*[2], where she argues that in her relationship with power, the subject is created by a reliance upon it. In Mariam's case, she feels unworthy due to her *harami* upbringing and has a strong need for validation and belonging, which Rasheed provides through the social sanction of marriage. But because of her status as a woman, she depends on male guardianship, which he exploits to establish his dominance over her and define her identity. This realisation frames the oppressive dynamics that underpin Mariam's marriage and her urban mobility.

Preceding the arrival of Laila, Rasheed's second wife in this novel, Mariam's entire world is contained within the domestic sphere. The potential for public humiliation and violence, which are prevalent in Afghan society (of the time), keeps Mariam confined to the domestic space, limiting her sense of freedom, whose entrapment she can never escape. From a young age, Nana instils in Mariam a sense of inferiority and the need for '*tahamul*' (endurance), which translates into accepting her fate and the limitations placed upon her as a woman. Unlike Laila, whose experiences of coming from an educated and relatively progressive background allows for a more dynamic and outwardly resistant trajectory, Mariam's narrative is static. Even Mariam's final moment of rebellion, which involves the killing of Rasheed in the climax, is a domestic

[1] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 53.

[2] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3.

act, since it was enacted within the kitchen. Her resistance occurs within the space of her subjugation. In doing so, what was once the object of servitude becomes the medium of resistance.

Isabel Fall, in her ground-breaking short story "*I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter,*" (2020) asks, "*Can you tell me honestly that killing is a genderless act? The method? The motive? The victim? When you imagine the innocent dead, who do you see?*".[3] Despite being driven by love for Laila and her kids, Mariam's act of killing Rasheed results in her execution by the Taliban. In narrative terms, it rejects the ontological passivity that women are assigned by Afghan patriarchy, and consequently, by Hosseini's fictional world. Even though Rasheed's killing was morally justified, it subverts from being portrayed as a victory, since Mariam's execution, which re-instates the patriarchal ledger of guilt, casts a shadow over it.

In the end, however, by taking responsibility for Rasheed's death, Mariam essentially removes herself from the narrative, as most women with her fate would do. With this, Laila and Tariq (her childhood lover) are able to reunite and build a life together, escaping the immediate threats of their oppressive environment. In the epilogue, when Laila gets pregnant, and Tariq is seen playing a game of what to name their future child, the game only includes male names, for if it is a girl, the novel alludes to Laila's intention of naming her Mariam.

> "She thought of her entry into the world, the *harami* child of a lowly villager...And yet she was leaving this world as a woman who had loved and had been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings." (p. 361)

Hosseini mostly switches between Mariam, and in the second half, Laila, in their first-person narratives, which makes it possible to access their thoughts. The main premise of the book is that women suffer, not whether or not they

[3] Isabel Fall, "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter," *Clarkesworld Magazine*, no. 161 (January 1, 2020), 13.

do. What it asks instead is how they manage to survive it. Taking the form of endurance, violence, and eventually martyrdom, the novel's power lies in showing how the pain of Afghan womanhood, against the backdrop of political violence, is patterned through gendered and systemic structures. The shame Mariam inherits is not solely from her mother, but from a society that equates a woman's worth to her reproductive utility. This is what gives the novel its affective force. While being conscious of not pathologising Mariam, it historicises the factors that create *a* Mariam, whereby she becomes the canvas upon which the brutal realities of a patriarchal, war-torn society are inscribed.

> "Learn this now, and learn it well my daughter: Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman." (p. 7).

If Mariam's suffering marks the limits of Afghan womanhood under class and rural poverty, Nila Wahdati[4] in Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* inhabits the other end of the spectrum - where liberation becomes another mask for female social alienation. She casually utters this hauntingly forbidding quote to her adoptive daughter, Pari:

> "You know I don't like dogs. They have no self-respect. You kick them and they still love you. It's depressing." (p. 252).

Nila, a French-Afghan woman of noble birth, is wealthy and cosmopolitan. She dresses flamboyantly, smokes defiantly, and entertains men without apology. She leaves her husband, adopts a child, and relocates to Paris with her daughter. She is, in every sense, an archetype of the sexually liberated woman. But this liberation is purchased through class, race, and cultural capital. She is desirable because she embodies modernity, and her transgressions are folded into the romance of her personality.

Mariam, by contrast, is always outside this realm of desirability. As a poor, illicit, rural Afghan woman, her body becomes a site of punishment. She is passed from a mother who could not protect her, to a father who disowns her,

[4] See Khaled Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed* (New York: Riverhead, 2013).

and eventually to a husband who sexually violates her when she cannot bear him a child. Even when Mariam becomes the sacrificial mother, giving herself up for Laila (her metaphorical daughter), it is not her reclaiming her body, but its final surrender. The woman who was denied motherhood becomes a mother through death. While Mariam's agency, rooted in local, rural, Afghan life, only arrives at the edge of martyrdom, Nila, half-European, operates within the fantasy of liberation through Westernisation.

Dorreen Massey in her book, *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) writes, it is not simply a question of unequal distribution that some people move and have more control than others.[5] It is that the mobility and control of some groups actively weakens that of others. The relationship between them is thus one of forclusion, where the mobile is present discursively and constitutively in the delineation of the weak. This reveals that in a racialised world, based on class boundaries, Nila can move, because Mariam cannot, and precisely because Mariam cannot, Nila can.

Hosseini, in both these novels, while showing us the women who desire, sheds light upon the consequences of these desires which are radically unequal. Desire, instead of being neutral, is classified and morally evaluated based on how and by whom it is felt. This differentiation implies a politics of visibility and the extent to which a person's gender interacts with their own social and cultural environments. In his study of social representation and behaviour, Michel de Certeau (1984) outlines the methods that the average (wo)man might employ to reclaim her own independence from the ubiquitous forces of commerce, politics and culture.[6] Hosseini's novels, in a similar fashion, reveal that the erotic is unevenly distributed through political affairs. He crafts desire as a literary device to accentuate class privilege through Nila, a tool of domination through Rashid, but never a language a woman born in the shackles of shame, like Mariam, is fluent in.

The foreword of *Ten Indian Classics* (2022) by Ranjit Hoskote provides insight into how South Asian literature navigates identity, history, historiography,

[5] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 265.

[6] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii–xiv.

and resistance.[7] Analysed through this lens, by exploring the intersection of colonialism, gender, and power, we can see how Hosseini carries these historiographical registers while supplementing them into characters like Mariam. He shows how pain reverberates through generations, over things that are both spoken *and* unspoken, while offering a detailed, moving portrait of the experiences of ordinary Muslim women, and of the contingencies within which they live. In a way, Hosseini's women, in writing endings for themselves, are writing different beginnings for those who come after them the way Mariam does for Laila.

To conclude, as Arunava Sinha commented on N. Prabhakaran's work *Theeyoor Chronicles* (2021), "Fiction which reminds us that the deaths and the lives of others could so easily be our own, is a triumph of both imagination and of translation."[8]

Therefore, to comprehend Hosseini's women as historical subjects is to reimagine fiction as a form of feminist witnessing. By using trauma and critical sociology as a lens, we may observe how Afghan social institutions are intrinsically tied to individual suffering. Nana's bitterness, Mariam's illegitimacy, and Laila's eventual survival show how Afghan women endure brutal circumstances through generations of sacrifice. The representational limitations placed on these women underlines their centrality in the nation's broader imagination as well as the intimate domains of the family. It echoes the notion that, in Afghan society's patriarchal institutions, the family becomes the state's smallest ideological microcosm, where sexuality is governed by obligation rather than desire.

In the end, their narratives demonstrate how the maternal has radical potential, the personal is always political, and the textual becomes the site of embodied historicity, which is essential to reimagining women themselves. Thus, by hinting at their fragile interior lives, Hosseini asks us to reconsider Afghan women as historical subjects whose goals and sacrifices impact both the cultural memory of Afghanistan and the possibility of feminist futures.

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[7] Ranjit Hoskote, foreword to Ten Indian Classics, by various authors, ed. Pushpesh Pant (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2022), xi.

[8] Arunava Sinha, blurb on back cover of Theeyoor Chronicles, by N. Prabhakaran, trans. Jayasree Kalathil (New Delhi: Eka/Westland Books, 2021).

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To measure and evaluate the making of India in the modern landscape is to undertake a never-ending journey where time refuses to pause and space is constantly reimagined. How did it become the India that we inhabit today? A linear yet complex story captures its transformations, its experiments with modernity—the transitions that remain, even till today, incomplete. *Slices of Indian History: The Story of India's Transformation* situates India's tryst with modernity precisely within this vast, ever-moving terrain. The book's cover engages the reader to see the never-closing windows of India's past: the colonial town of Shimla's twisting streets with the backdrop of canopies of deodar; the continuous line of Partition refugees whose downcast looks symbolise the ache of displacement and whose pots are held tight like their homelands; the imperial clock tower standing as a symbol of colonial power and culture; and finally, the quiet portrait of Gandhi, a figure endlessly written about yet hardly understood in its fullness. Together, these visuals weave themselves into a long story of India's continuous metamorphosis from the shadows of colonial rule to the present-day challenges. Thus, the book seeks to trace an odyssey of India's becoming through the shifts of transformation and transitions from colonialism and its aftermath.

The book is a collection of essays originally written for various newspapers by Salil Misra. Each essay opens a distinct window into India's shifting encounter with modernity. Together, these essays resemble slices of a larger mural, a brief yet thought-provoking glimpse that, when placed next to each other, sketch the making of the nation. In accordance with its title, the book gathers 'slices' of India's history to point towards a comprehensive picture that the author himself admits will always remain incomplete. What provides these essays with their strength is the author's scholarly precision in historical enquiry, for he never treats historical happenings as mere events but as

processes that shaped, and continue to shape, Indian society. In this layered journey, the author takes the reader across the tangled, unfinished terrain of modern India.

The book is divided into five parts, each opening a new yet connected window to the larger archive of India's modern journey. Part one discusses the "episodes of consequences," (p.1) taking the readers to those moments when global events such as the two World Wars tilt the ground beneath a nation. Part two turns to institutions and spaces, treating them as living architectures where power, memory, and everyday life converge. In part three, titled "Heroes and Villains," the author sheds light on the individuals who shaped the face of India's political, economic, and moral imagination. This part presents them as complex figures forged in the heat of their times. Part four turns to the making of the Constitution, a blueprint built on an edifice of debate and consensus. Finally, the book reaches part five, which offers the many flavours of Gandhi's life and philosophy. Here, Gandhi becomes the central figure of the narrative. By saving its most engaging reflections on Gandhi for the end, the book arranges itself into a slow-building crescendo, allowing its climax to rest on the figure who, for generations, embodied the paradoxes and possibilities of modern India.

Part one of the book contextualises Indian events within broader global currents. The twentieth century emerges not as a span of dates, but as a furnace in which humanity repeatedly tested the limits of its own endurance. India enters this century not by choice but by gravity, having been pulled into the First and the Second World War as conflicts born out of imperial rivalries and a world intoxicated with its own insecurities. These "episodes of consequences" (p. 1) show a world capable of dazzling technological optimism even as it perfected the art of destruction: two hundred and fifty wars, one hundred and ten million deaths, while hatred in all forms—ethnic, racial, ideological—became the century's most widely traded commodity. India's men, food and resources were mobilised without consent, leading to famine in Bengal and uneven prosperity in Punjab, revealing how deeply global conflicts settled into Indian soil. The nuclear weapon, the "*qayamat*" (p. 11) of modernity, closed the century but did not end its anxieties: the Cold War—the unipolar moment of 1991— and today's race for dominance all grew from seeds sown during this turbulent age.

Amid global turbulence, the colonial state turned inward, mapping Indian society through the modern instrument of the census. What began as enumeration soon became conceptual engineering. For instance, the Kabirpanthis were fractured into the categories of Hindu and Muslim by the census of 1901. Thus, the British reading of varna, jati, and caste made the evolving social categories into a rigid classificatory grid. Even when caste was dropped from the 1941 census, its imprints remained; as we know independent India inherited the political and psychological weight of these categories. In 1917-19, Colonial promises of responsible governance collided with the moral abyss of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The massacre lasted beyond the commission of inquiry, travelling through poetry, memory, and vengeance, culminating in Udham Singh's assassination of O'Dwyer. This massacre reminds the world that when a state crushes innocents, it dissolves its own legitimacy. A lesson which the colonial government failed to learn. In the continuous story of India's freedom struggle, things sharpened in 1942, when the Quit India Movement—"the most un-Gandhian struggle nonetheless initiated by Gandhi" (p. 40)—struck at an empire that no longer commanded consent. The freedom gained at midnight in 1947 was followed by the catastrophe of Partition, a calamity measured not only in twelve million migrants but in gendered silences, legislative divergences in India and Pakistan, and memories that refuse to stay buried. Partition, just like the two wars, produced no victors. It was another reminder that a century obsessed with redrawing borders rarely paused to consider what lines do to people. Taken together, these chapters explore India's transformation within the global currents of the two World Wars, imperial state practices and the manner in which India responded to these definitive events.

Part two gives us a glimpse of the pretence of modern governance under colonial rule and its materialisation within universities, cities, and state architecture. The roots of this modernity can be traced further back to the strange sovereignty of the East India Company, a trading corporation that became a territorial power, binding India to global circuits. Its successor, the British crown, extended control over its subjects' minds through universities shaped by Macaulay's Minute, Wood's Despatch, and the Universities Act of 1857, whose foundation was already laid down by the Company. Vernacular traditions were displaced rather than being brought into dialogue with; this created institutions that remained "prisoners of the past" (p. 74), still

struggling to reconcile knowledge with vernacular traditions and modern skills. This struggle finds spatial form in Delhi and Shimla. Both cities were "doing very well and also badly" (p. 83), resilient yet overburdened. Shimla, a mountainous region reshaped into an imperial capital, was segregated by the British into Station Ward and Bazaar Ward, yet its people were spirited enough to join the national movement. After independence, India turned to democracy and also to elections. Since the 1951-52 elections, Nehru's immense faith in popular mandate and citizens' participation has anchored India's democratic resilience even as institutions weakened and corruption corroded trust. This is the contradiction of India doing well and also poorly. The reorganisation of states in 1956 offers a counter-image of that particular moment when 152,000 public submissions shaped the map of the nation on a linguistic basis. Karnataka, Kerala, and later Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, and Haryana emerged not from coercion, but from listening. It was a democratic triumph drawn not by the force of rulers but by the voices of the people. What links these chapters is a shared focus on the institutionalisation of power and its spatial expression, which continues even today in state reorganisation, as part of an ongoing process involving the redrawing of authority and belonging.

The next part of the book revisits India through contested figures whose lives reveal the ambitions, ambiguities, choices, and possibilities that shaped India's journey towards modernity. This part begins when Vasco da Gama stepped onto the shores of Calicut in 1498. His arrival set in motion the long arc of integration, affluence, and domination that would crystallise in the post-World War globe (p. 136). Its shadows fell heavily on Mysore, when Tipu Sultan recognised with rare clarity that survival required not merely defeating the British but expelling them, making him in retrospect "a nationalist before nationalists were around" (p. 142). His death in 1799 closed not an era but a possibility, a road whose unfulfilled and unrealised potential continues to haunt India's modern arc. This tension between collapse and possibility returned in 1857, when rebellion lifted the fading poet-emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar into reluctant prominence. Politically diminished yet imaginatively expansive, Zafar embodied a world of longing and cosmopolitan memory. When the sepoys came to him, he agreed hesitantly and fatefully, to lead them, thus becoming "a bird in a storm, but a giant one" (p. 149). His exile marked a civilizational break, opening corridors through which nationalism could later

walk. Alongside this, there was also a transformation of thought through a melodious language—Urdu—and a more melodious form of writing—poetry—and through the most melodious person, Ghalib, all of which unfolded within India. His writings on famine, ruin, and imperial collapse offered a philosophical compass that is still resonant with contemporary anxieties. His meditations on universalism, on the balance between progress and stability, and the tension between freedom and unfreedom, according to Salil Misra, speak to the existential core of modernity itself (p. 153). Another important figure in the theatre of negotiations and missteps was Mountbatten, the last Viceroy. He entered not as a solitary arbiter but as one actor among many. He presided over decisions in haste, such as advancing independence from June 1948 to August 1947 and delaying communal awards. Yet beneath these headline events lived the unsung heroes: the Ghadar revolutionaries, Chandra Singh Garhwali, and the INA, figures whose failures were formative and whose sacrifices pressed upon the national conscience (p. 175). Read together, these lives mark the stages of India's transformation, from European arrival to resistance against them through mass awakening.

Out of these collisions emerged one of India's most remarkable achievements: the crafting of its constitution, which is discussed in part four. The narrative begins by situating the Indian Constitution not as a sudden post-colonial artefact but as the outcome of a prolonged twentieth-century gestation. This included a series of colonial "installments" stretching from 1858 to 1935 (p. 199). The colonial government rejected the Nehru Report of 1928, but it made a huge contribution to the central ideas of the Indian Constitution by bringing forth the notions of fundamental rights, a bicameral legislature, and universal adult franchise. The Constituent Assembly debates convened in 1946 were a result of the pressure on Britain in the post-World War II period and the Quit India Movement of 1942. The Assembly emerged as a crucible where India's political, social, and economic future was consciously imagined. Thus, the Constitution became a blueprint for India's transformation. Its durability, the author argues, lies in its distinctive combination of democratic consensus and elite expertise, represented in the indirect election of its members such as Ambedkar and K.T. Shah. At first glance, the Indian Constitution might appear as a successor to the Government of India Act, 1935, but on a deeper level, its ideological preference for egalitarianism stood in contrast to colonial interests. The uniqueness of the Constitution lies in the process of its making

through disagreements, debates, and reasoned compromise, for instance, Gandhi-Ambedkar exchanges on Dalits and separate electorates. The process of its making has been the legacy of the Indian freedom struggle through democratisation of politics, mass participation, and global influence, inclusive of socialist thought. Despite all these merits, it missed the opportunity to reimagine gender justice.

The transformation of India, through Constitution-making shaped its post-independence years, especially the revolutionary period from 1947-52, marking the onset of independence and the first elections in post-colonial India. The early march towards modernity was guided by state agency, secularism and democracy, but as argued by Shahid Amin,[1] the persistence of communalism, the pretence of "Unity in Diversity," (p. 225) and slow economic growth have hampered this march in the long run. But where is the answer to this paradox? The author sees it as embracing a balance between economic hardware and ideological software. This puts a responsibility on us as citizens to fulfil the dream that our constitution-makers dreamt of.

Part five takes us to the person who was the answer to the question of ideological software raised earlier. This is the man who refused to be frozen but was continually evolving Gandhi. His late entry into the Indian freedom struggle shows his rooted experiments of truth and nonviolence in South Africa, like Phoenix Settlement, Tolstoy Farm, *The Indian Opinion* newspaper, etc., against the racial discrimination. The techniques he adopted, like satyagraha, nonviolence, and ashram, were all adapted to Indian conditions, but with a new element of fasting. Gandhi's own admission, "I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent" (p. 240), becomes a key to understanding his openness to change, for instance, his shifting engagement with modernity. Despite these inconsistencies, one thing remained constant within Gandhi: his commitment to human service through moral means. For instance, he was neither a traditionalist nor a renunciatory saint; he envisioned society as an "oceanic circle" (p. 255), advocating for a decentralised power structure. This moral vision was further illuminated through his dialogue with

[1] Shahid Amin, "Representing the Musalman: Then and Now, Now and Then," in *Subaltern Studies XII: Muslims, Dalits and the Fabrications of History*, ed. S. Mayaram, M.S.S. Pandian, and A. Skaria (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 1-35.

Nehru, which was multidimensional in nature. The Nehru-Gandhi relationship was marked by disagreements, mutual correction, and synthesis. For instance, Nehru's critique of *Hind Swaraj*, capitalism, Gandhi's reluctance towards constitutional matters, his strategy of multi-pronged struggle in a phased manner against the British, as opposed to Nehru's strategy of one large-scale struggle of total independence. Their exchanges shaped both the strategy and imagination of the national movement; and in this process, both of them were transformed as well. This section offers a measured assessment of Gandhi's engagement with women's questions. While he expanded women's participation in mass movements and redefined courage and resistance as feminine virtues, he was reluctant to challenge entrenched gendered roles. He was also sceptical towards women's political representation through positive discrimination.

Despite these contradictions, it is his final interview with Margaret Bourke-White that marked his commitment to ethical means, for he believed that even the atomic bomb must be confronted with "prayerful action" (p. 309). Unfortunately, Gandhi has been misused in the contemporary politics, especially through the misinterpretation of his emphasis on religion which, for Gandhi, signified moral order rather than sectarian identity. It was in this climate of misinterpretation that his assassination took place, amidst with the communal atmosphere of the Partition. His insistence on Hindu-Muslim fraternity and reconciliation with Pakistan was perceived as betrayal by communal forces, leading to his assassination by Nathuram Godse hours after his interview, on 30 January 1948. Yet, his death was not the last goodbye;[2] he continued to be remembered in India, and abroad, by figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. This section affirms that Gandhi is India's gift to the world.

Thus, the book under review is a reminder of India's modern story as a collage of fall and rise, dominance and resistance, poetic lamentation and constitutional vision. The journey that began with a ship at Calicut and found one of its most restless centres in Gandhi continues, still unfinished, uncontained, and alive.

[2] The phrase 'not the last good bye' is taken from David Servan-Schreiber, *Not the Last Goodbye: Reflections on Life, Death, Healing and Cancer* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012).

What sustains this book is its language, simple yet textured with an engaging, almost conversational cadence that invites the reader into complex histories. It has the flavour of storytelling without surrendering historical enquiry, scholarly rigour, and nuances, allowing arguments to surface organically. Its greatest strength lies in what it chooses not to be, neither exhaustive nor encyclopaedic, neither burdened by academic excess nor constrained by disciplinary gatekeeping. Instead, the book is enriching and thought provoking, the intended audience is wide and heterogeneous, from scholars and students to public readers. I am confident each of them will enter its pages with different curiosities and leave with a shared sense of having encountered history as a lived experience rather than archival residue.

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Chitralekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp 378.

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Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination authored by Chitralekha Zutshi participates in the larger intellectual process of recovering the historical consciousness embedded in, and manifested through, diverse forms of commemorating the past in pre-colonial South Asia. Zutshi challenges the colonial assumption that pre-colonial India lacked a coherent awareness of its past by showing how Kashmir developed its own modes of remembering and representing history. She traces the *longue durée* of "historical imagination"[1] in Kashmir, examining how texts, oral traditions, sacred geographies, linguistic registers (Sanskrit, Persian, and Kashmiri), religious frameworks, social practices, and political contingency contributed to evolving forms of historical consciousness.

The book is organised into six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Zutshi's principal aim is to resurrect the life of those Persian narrative traditions—from sixteenth through nineteenth centuries—which had been marginalised in favour of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and its Sanskrit continuations and were subsequently dismissed as unreliable by the colonialist and nationalist proponents. In pursuit of this, she examines the Indo-Persian chronicles called *tarikhs* and Sufi hagiographical texts, *tazkiras,* many of whose authors were associated with Sufi *Khanqahs* (hospices) and simultaneously maintained close ties with political centres of power. Beyond addressing the political realities of their day, these texts also recorded the prevailing socio-religious convictions. As Raziuddin Aquil has argued, the

[1] Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2.

classification of Sufi texts (*malfuzat* and *tazkiras*) as 'authentic' and 'spurious' is superficial; although tales of miracles contained in them might sound irrational to the modern mind, but, analysing the purpose and the context in which these tales were narrated is relevant for reconstructing the historical consciousness of the period to which these texts belong.[2]

In her first chapter, Zutshi critically engages with four Persian texts: *Dastur-us-Salikin* by Shaykh Hamza Makhdum (c. 1554–55); *Taufat ul-Ahbab* by Muhammad Ali Kashmiri (c. 1560s); *Tarikh-i Sayyid Ali* by Sayyid Ali (1579); and *Baharistan-i Shahi* (completed in 1614) by an anonymous writer (p. 23). In analysing these Sufi texts, Zutshi views them as part of a larger Kashmiri narrative tradition blending with various genres like *tazkiras*, *tarikhs*, oral histories, and performances. In her view, it would be an injustice to consider them merely as translations of the *Rajatarangini* and deny their historical value. Zutshi, therefore, argues that these literary works not only document the Sufis' miraculous acts but also record the important historical processes, including the advent and spread of Islam in Kashmir (pp. 35-43).

The second chapter deals with how the Mughal conquest of Kashmir catalysed the development of the *tarikh* tradition in the region. Abul Fazl's selection of *Rajatarangini* as a suitable source for composing his *Ain-i Akbari* motivated *tarikh* writers to seek legitimacy from *Rajatarangini* and its Sanskrit tradition. Although these writers invoked *Rajatarangini* and its continuations, they preserved regional distinctiveness by incorporating local narratives, oral traditions, and indigenous cosmologies. Tracing the distinctiveness and their interactions, Zutshi examines four other Persian texts: *Tarikh-i Haider Malik*, completed by Haider Malik Chadurah between 1620 and 1621 during his tenure as governor of Kashmir under Emperor Jahangir; *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (1710) by Narayan Koul 'Ajiz', *mir munshi* to the Mughal deputy governor Arif Khan; Khwaja Muhammad Azam Dyadmari's *Waqiat-i Kashmir*, and; *Bagh-i Sulaiman* (1778) by Saadullah Shahabadi (p. 75). Subsequently, the formalisation of Persian as the court's literary culture under the Mughals marked the end of the dominance of Sanskrit as the elite cosmopolitan literary language.

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[2] Raziuddin Aquil, *Lovers of God: Sufism and the Politics of Islam in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 115.

In the third chapter, Zutshi discusses the emergence of vernacular histories and the use of Kashmiri as the language of poetry and storytelling, defining it as the "language of the people" (p. 132). Francesca Orsini has shown how pre-colonial India was already a deeply multilingual society consisting of multiple traditions of knowledge and how literary production in specific languages marked diglossia between 'classical' and the 'vernaculars.'[3] Kashmiri, too, evolved under strong Persian stylistic influence. The period roughly from 1750 to 1900 has been termed as the middle period of Kashmiri literary development by Braj K Kachru. During this period, Persian literary forms such as ghazals and *masnavis* were borrowed, and a Persianised style of Kashmiri was developed, parallelling the Sanskritised Kashmiri. Themes from Persia such as *Yusuf Zuleikha, Shirin Khusrao, Laila Majnun,* etc. predominated in literary compositions. Apart from this, folk stories, episodes from the eulogies of the Prophet, the *Bhagavad Gita,* and the *Ramayana* were being translated into Kashmiri. Such endeavours contributed further to the Persianisation of Kashmiri poetic form and content. Gradually, influences of Urdu, English, and Hindi could also be located.[4]

Urdu entered Kashmir as a new vernacular with the strengthening of political ties between the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and British Punjab. At the crossroads of these developments and transformations, Zutshi examines three Persian *tarikhs* and one Urdu *tarikh* that engaged with written and oral traditions across multiple languages, confronted orientalist claims to textual authenticity, and thereby contributed decisively to Kashmir's socio-political and cultural transformation. These texts include Birbal Kachru's *Tarikh-i Kashmir* (1846); Ghulam Muhammad Nabi Shah Khanyari's *Wajiz ul-Tawarikh* (late 1850s); *Tawarikh-i Guldasta-i Kashmir* by Pandit Hargopal Kaul Khasta (1877), written in Urdu; and Pir Ghulam Hassan Shah Khuihami's *Tarikh-i Hassan* (1880s) (p. 134). By the early twentieth century, the Persian historiographical tradition in Kashmir could not survive effectively except in the form of manuscripts and court petitions. *Tarikh-i Kabir* (1899–1900) by Muhammad Haji Mohiuddin Miskin was its final multi-volume work.

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[3] Francesca Orsini, ed. *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 2.

[4] Braj B. Kachru, *Kashmiri Literature.* Vol. VIII, Fasc. 4 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. by Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), 34-35.

The fourth chapter addresses the late nineteenth century, when colonial and nationalist philological projects came into force. These projects labelled Kashmir's Persian historical culture as "mere interpolations and crude imitations," (p. 238) causing its eventual decline. In response to orientalist assumption that pre-colonial India was historically unconscious, nationalist projects deployed *Rajatarangini* and Kashmir's Sanskrit tradition to recover the early history of India, converting its regional identity into a national one. Kashmir became a contested site for the colonial and nationalist project of knowledge production. On the one hand, orientalist scholars such as Georg Buhler and M. A. Stein endeavoured to establish *Rajatarangini* and related Sanskrit texts as the only authentic history of Kashmir (p. 189). On the other hand, nationalists such as R. S. Pandit and J. C. Dutt considered the unearthing of Sanskrit traditions as a way to locate their classical past in the nation-making imagination (pp. 195-228). Further, through its translations into Hindi, *Rajatarangini* was eventually absorbed into Indian nationalist discourse, thereby disconnecting it from its original Kashmiri politico-contextual setting. The collection of manuscripts, deploying *Rajatarangini* as an important source of history writing, thus, became an integral part of ongoing production of colonial knowledge.

In the fifth chapter, Zutshi explores the formation and persistence of a Kashmiri public sphere defined by narrative practices, oral traditions, and performative modes. Through a study of Kashmiri public discourse in the *longue duree,* Zutshi attempts to dispel the notion that colonialism constituted a historical rupture that politicised religious and regional identities in the late nineteenth-century Kashmir. According to her, Kashmiri popular understanding of the past was both historical and commemorative in nature (p. 262). Kashmiris, despite relatively low levels of literacy, remembered certain events and individuals through repeated retellings and reinterpretations. This was followed by the rise of print culture, which further transformed Kashmiri vernacular literary life. In the early twentieth century, printers, and booksellers such as Ghulam Muhammad Noor Muhammad of Maharaj Gunj, Srinagar, played a crucial role by publishing numerous works in Kashmiri. Beyond facilitating Kashmiri narrative traditions to flourish in print, this also enabled their wider dissemination and survival.

In the sixth chapter, Zutshi examines the discourses surrounding *Kashmiriyat* (state-driven enterprise to create a unique cultural and literary identity) for legitimising the Kashmiri national identity (p. 339).[5] But she emphasises that a nuanced re-reading and re-examination of Kashmir's diverse voices can transcend reductive binary narratives and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the region's complex identity and history. The modern discipline of history in the subcontinent has been shaped by distinctions between "Hindu" and "Muslim" periods and identities, often focused on territorial divisions. In Kashmir, this framework took shape around the turn of the twentieth century and became firmly established in the postcolonial era. Attending instead to the many alternative narratives and voices—rooted in both local memory and wider universals—would, according to Zutshi, enable historians to represent Kashmir's past in less polarising and more contextually grounded ways.

The book thus exemplifies South Asian modes of recording and commemorating the past, whether through *itihas, purana,* public performances, or oral recitations. A central argument contained in this book is the contested status of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and how its nationalist reception in the nineteenth and twentieth-century elevated it to the status of a 'national' text (p. 176)[6] while often dismissing or marginalising Persian or vernacular sources. Zutshi situates these debates at the intersection of religious, linguistic, cultural, and political forces, showing how historical practice in Kashmir has always been shaped by overlapping and competing registers of identity. However, Zutshi's ambitious claim about Persian histories as being the representative of Kashmiri historical thinking, and how Persian *tarikhs* gave rise to a distinct regional Kashmiri identity feels somewhat unconvincing. Here, the author attempts to analyse the ideas of identity formation in early modern Kashmir through the lens of modern sensibilities, often risking romanticisation of the sources and inadvertently reproducing the hierarchies she is trying to address. Further, her endeavour to trace a *longue durée* trajectory of 'historical imagination' in Kashmir is not sufficiently theorised, as the category tends to subsume heterogeneous forms of memory and knowledge-making under the same umbrella, without addressing their

[5] Also see, Chitralekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir,* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2003), 2.

[6] For further details see Chapter 4

internal tensions. Moreover, a critical engagement with her analytical framework and clearer articulation of how specific sources illuminate rather than populate her narrative would have made the book easier to read and comprehend, giving the narrative greater lucidity and coherence. Nevertheless, the book successfully uncovers an underexplored archive of Kashmir's intellectual traditions and invites alternate ways of engaging with the region's past.

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Introduction

John J. Mearsheimer, a leading political scientist and professor at the University of Chicago, presents a provocative theory that has sparked significant debate within the field of International Relations. Mearsheimer is one of the foremost followers of structural realism, and in this book, he establishes his own version of it, which he calls offensive realism. The original edition was published in 2001 and was later updated and revised in 2014. The book aims to explain why there has been a historically persistent conflict among great powers and why peace is only temporary. Mearsheimer's core argument is that the structure of the international system shapes how great powers interact, and, as no overarching authority exists in this structure, great powers are driven to maximise their own power, at the expense of others, leading to recurring competition and conflict. While this argument makes for a pessimistic interpretation of international politics, offering little hope for a peaceful world among the great powers, this position is articulated with much clarity. The purpose of this review is to discuss the main arguments of the book and to judge its strengths, weaknesses, and overall enduring value to any contemporary study contributing to the global order.

Core Thesis: Offensive Realism and the Tragedy

Mearsheimer's central argument rests on five assumptions:

1. The international system is anarchic (ultimately, there is no overarching institution with power above states).
2. States have offensive military capabilities.
3. States can never be sure about the intentions of other states.

4. States' primary goal is survival.
5. States are rational actors and can think strategically with respect to their security.

From these premises, Mearsheimer deduces that great powers must maximise their relative power, often through offensive strategies, because that presents the greatest likelihood of survival in an uncertain world. Mearsheimer calls this pursuit of power the "tragedy of great power politics" (p. 21). Even if states only want to survive, the best way to ensure survival is to accumulate power at the expense of other states, which leads, paradoxically, to competition and conflict. Each state's actions, such as defence expenditure, forming alliances, and competing for influence, are perceived as threats even when the motivations are defensive. These perceptions often lead to arms races, formation of rival blocs, and, at times, open conflict. Thus, competition is inherent in the structure of great-power politics, regardless of leaders' intentions.

Unlike defensive realists (e.g. Kenneth Waltz), who think states only seek enough power to survive,[1] Mearsheimer believes that states always strive for hegemony, whenever the opportunity is feasible or not. However, Mearsheimer argues that, compared to geography and logistics, global hegemony is impossible, so great powers pursue regional hegemony and will not allow other states to pursue it either. For example, the United States has sought dominance in the Western Hemisphere and has worked to prevent other powers from dominating Europe or East Asia.

Contemporary relevance

Mearsheimer bases his theory of offensive realism on an interpretation of contemporary power politics that emphasises systematic parallels to previous great-power competitions. He claims to see the same patterns, ranging from Napoleonic France and Imperial Germany to the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, now re-emerging. For example, in terms of the US–China competition, he interprets China's rapid economic and

[1] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

military rise, as well as its attempts to increase its influence in the South China Sea and the Belt and Road Initiative, as a bid for regional hegemony.

Mearsheimer interprets the US responses—cooperative balancing through strengthened alliances with Australia–United Kingdom–United States security pact and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, along with closer ties with Japan and India—as the type of balancing behaviour that offensive realism would expect from the United States. Similarly, in context of the Russia–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) confrontation, Mearsheimer interprets the Ukraine war as a case of power-maximising behaviour, in which Russia is seeking to secure its sphere of influence and NATO is seeking to expand in order to preclude any one country from dominating Europe.

The increasing competition over hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity among the great powers is also reminiscent of previous arms races, highlighting the structural power effects that tend towards increased relative power for all great powers. Mearsheimer simply concludes that cultural, ideological, or economic differences are less significant than systemic imperatives. Under these pressures, great powers (whether democratic or authoritarian) tend to behave similarly when survival and dominance are at stake.

Strengths of the Book

One of the book's greatest advantages is its clarity. Mearsheimer synthesises international politics into a logically consistent framework that is easy to understand. The assumptions and predictions of offensive realism are clear, and readers can follow the manner in which he carries out the logical process from premise to conclusion. The clear argument makes the book appealing even to those who are relatively new to theories pertaining to the field of International Relations.

The book is firmly rooted in history. Mearsheimer does not offer abstract theorising disconnected from empirical realities, but rather places his arguments in historical context with real-world examples. His account of the balance of power in Europe, the Cold War, and US foreign policy provides an empirical grounding for his theoretical claims.

Mearsheimer published his book when the majority temperament was one of optimism about the idea of a "liberal peace" after the Cold War. He provided a counter to this mentality, arguing instead that the great-power competition is alive and well irrespective of the cooperative claims of globalisation and democratic expansion. Derivative of which, he also raises scepticism about liberal institutionalism, which appears to have been foresighted as the world shifts toward a state of rising tensions.

Mearsheimer writes with clarity and conviction. He avoids jargon-heavy language, typical of many International Relations texts, making his work engaging not only for academics but also for policymakers, journalists, and general readers interested in global affairs.

Weaknesses and Critiques

A central critique is the deterministic tone of offensive realism. By emphasising structural constraints and the imperatives of survival, Mearsheimer downplays agency, ideas, and domestic politics. Critics argue that states do not behave aggressively in every instance—for example, post-war Germany and Japan adopted pacifism, which they maintained despite the material power they could have projected. The book also conveys a sense that war and conflict are inevitable outcomes, leaving little concession to diplomacy, norms, or institutional cooperation.

Mearsheimer considers great powers to be unitary, rational actors. However, the post-Cold War world has been identified with an increasing proliferation of influential non-state actors—multinational corporations, terrorist networks, and international institutions operating outside the traditional state structure—while states themselves still exhibit behaviour shaped by these dynamics. As states become increasingly intertwined and dependent on one another economically (globalisation) and encounter transnational challenges (like climate change), power politics, while crucially important, has become somewhat more complicated, if not outdated in considering International Relations, and is not given the attention it deserves in the book.

By discounting how conflict may be mitigated by regimes and norms, while also neglecting formation of states and their commitments to norms in

cooperation or competition, Mearsheimer understates the influence of their desire for legitimacy and resorting to violence for achieving their ends. For example, liberal and constructivist scholars address the ways in which international institutions, like the Responsibility to Protect, often constrain decision-making in ways that are meaningful.

Engaging with The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

For the readers of today, Mearsheimer's pessimism might feel out of touch, especially in our age, when modern claims of globalisation, economic interdependence, democratic institutionalisation, and international organisations are supposedly working towards reducing conflict. Mearsheimer takes on this very optimism of liberal institutionalism, to remind us that underlying all the trade agreements, summits, and peace agreements lies a far uglier logic of power politics that has never and perhaps will never, cease to exist. Regardless of whether one fully accepts or vehemently disagrees with his conclusions, the work remains an important reality check that international politics has not changed and the motivations to compete are still strong in the 21st century.

For students, academics, and professionals of International Relations, Mearsheimer's book is not merely a historical analysis of power relations, but is also an immaculate theoretical toolkit in which concepts like anarchy, the security dilemma, buck-passing, regional hegemony, and the balance of power are explained so lucidly that the reader can then use this theoretical vision or framework to analyse other theories of International Relations as well as most major historical and contemporary political events.

The book invokes one to ask questions like, do states always seek hegemony? Are there instances—like those of post-war Japan, or the European Union—in which states intentionally limit their ambitions of power? Is conflict unavoidable? Can certain structural pressures be ameliorated or delayed through international norms, diplomacy, or economic interdependence, or are our actions merely conspicuous respites in an ongoing struggle?

How do new, emergent phenomena coexist with the lens of offensive realism? Of course, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, and space militarisation are

newly identified arenas for competition, but they occur simultaneously with numerous transnational issues such as climate change and pandemics. Although transnational issues may entice states toward cooperation, they can also, through the lens of offensive realism, incite continued competition among states—such as competition around Arctic resources or vaccine technology.

These considerations elevate *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* beyond a theory, transforming it into an arena for theoretical and policy discussions, urging readers to connect classical power politics with today's complicated and entangled world. As such, the book does not just serve as an introduction to realism, but also as a platform for examining the contradictory assumptions of liberalism, constructivism, or critical theories, which offer alternative answers to Mearsheimer's pessimistic view. Mearsheimer's book might look like a warning to some readers and pure pessimism to many, but at its core lies a theoretical construct that prompts them to consider that, regardless of whether one subscribes to offensive realism or defensive, liberal institutionalism or constructivism, power politics, in both its best and worst manifestations, has always existed and perhaps the key to salvation lies in questioning and figuring out why states behave as they do in a world system and why creating normative changes to reach and maintain long–term peace is so challenging for an international community standing tall under the banner of global interdependence.

Conclusion

The *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is a cornerstone book in International Relations and most explicitly presents an argument regarding structural conditions governing state actions. Theoretical lucidity, historical richness, and empirical precision make the book an invaluable resource for many ages to come. All the same, observers as well as scholars will rightly criticise Mearsheimer's determinism, the limited role of non-state actors, and the absence of dialogue with norms in his idea. However, regardless of whether one eventually falls in agreement or disagreement with Mearsheimer's claims, a reading and understanding of his arguments on international politics remains indispensable.

In an era in which the US-China competition is on the rise, Russia threatens the European order, and international institutions are stretched to their limits more than ever before, Mearsheimer's "*tragedy*" remains as relevant as ever and will undoubtedly continue to be an essential reading for scholars, policy-makers, and International Relations students, along with being a sombre reminder that power politics, rivalry, and the security dilemma will always exist as enduring features of international life—features that no amount of optimism, cooperation, institutional design, or normative aspiration can wholly erase.

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Cinema is a medium through which a nation displays its emotional life—its anxieties, its personality, its relationship to others, and (sometimes false) memories.[1] Accordingly, the "apparatus theory," propounded by Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, states that cinema is ideological by its very nature because films are curated to represent reality, and yet the apparatus of cinema is used to induce a passive, defenceless, dreamlike state in the viewers.[2] Therefore, beyond their narrative and aesthetic value, films serve as potent historical archives that "capture moments in time, societal attitudes, and cultural practices."[3] This is glaringly visible in the film under discussion, "*Razakar: The Silent Genocide of Hyderabad*," which was released in theatres on March 15, 2024. It is a Telugu action-drama movie, marketed as a "historical" depiction of the violence that accompanied the integration of the princely state of Hyderabad into the newly independent Indian Union.

On 11 June 1947, eight days after the announcement of the partition of British India, Mir Osman Ali Khan, the erstwhile Nizam of Hyderabad, announced through a farman that Hyderabad would not accede to either of the newly declared Dominions of Pakistan or India. The fact that this decision was governed not by religious, but politically ambitious concerns, is evident from the reasons that the Nizam had put forth for his decision. These were as

[1] Goutam Karmakar and Pippa Catteral, "Nation, Nationalism and Indian Hindi Cinema," *National Identities* 27, no. 1-2 (2025): 1.

[2] Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever, "Introduction: Exposing the Film Apparatus" in *Exposing the Film Apparatus: The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory*, ed. Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 14.

[3] Umair Ejaz and Sheed Isheal, *Cinema as Historical Archive, ResearchGate*, June 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392554005_Cinema_as_Historical_Archive, 1.

follows: firstly, the "basis of the division of British India is communal"; second, "[t]he subjects of my State have affinities and common interest with both the contemplated new Unions"; third, "[t]he result in law of the departure of the Paramount Power in the near future will be that I shall become entitled to resume the status of an independent sovereign"; and fourth, "[t]he political and constitutional picture in India has in the past few years been changing rapidly and who can say whether the two Units now contemplated for British India represent the final solution or whether there will be still further divisions or whether after all unity may eventually be achieved."[4]

This decision was not met with acceptance by the newly independent Indian state. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's Home Minister and Minister for States, remarked, "Hyderabad is, as it were, situated in India's belly. How can the belly breathe if it is cut off from the main body?"[5] From one perspective, Hyderabad's political arrangement appeared undemocratic as it had a predominantly Hindu population, comprising 81% of the demography, but its administrative and political life was dominated by a Muslim ruling class. From the inside system, however, the perception was entirely different as Hyderabad was viewed as a state, blessed with a remarkably secular outlook, enjoying communal harmony with a benign ruler.[6] In November 1947, Hyderabad signed a "Standstill Agreement" with India, which essentially maintained the indeterminate constitutional relationship it had enjoyed with the Government of India under the British system, better known as "paramountcy."[7]

In light of this conflict of perspective and the Nizam's political ambition of an independent and sovereign Hyderabad, the paramilitary force of Razakars,

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[4] Nizam's farman, signed June 26, 1947, All India States Peoples' Conference (AISPC) Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), File No. 68, Part II, quoted in Sunil Purushottam, "Federating the Raj: Hyderabad, Sovereign Kingship, and Partition," *Modern Asian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2020): 158.

[5] Taylor C. Sherman, "The Integration of the Princely State of Hyderabad and the Making of the Postcolonial State in India, 1948-56", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 44, no. 4 (2007): 492.

[6] Mohammed Hyder, *October Coup: A Memoir of the Struggle for Hyderabad* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2012), 2.

[7] Sunil Purushottam, "Internal Violence: The "Police Action" in Hyderabad," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no, 2 (2015): 438.

headed by Karim Razvi, came to gain significant momentum. These "volunteers" were associated with the Majlis-i-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeinn (MIM), a political party with considerable influence over the Nizam.[8] It is the violence perpetrated by this particular organisation that the film under discussion attempts to focus on. It can be located in the long lineup of films attempting to "educate" the audience about "hidden" truths and "forgotten" history.[9]

Before delving into the plot, one should pay careful attention to the naming of the movie. The use of the term "silent genocide" in the title is not an unaware choice as it is meant to invoke a historical memory of absolute violence and brutality that seems to have been forgotten, and therefore in need of re-invocation. While the role of violence during the state making process cannot be denied, the depiction of this violence in a twisted manner to suit the narratives of the current hyper-nationalist regime, which rests on majoritarian politics, is what appears as a predicament. The teaser of the film claimed that the Nizam's aim was to make Hyderabad an independent Islamic state, and a "silent genocide" was committed on the Hindu population of Hyderabad state.[10] In reality, however, this violence was not neatly defined along religious lines and played out in a multifaceted manner, stemming from a complex interplay of a number of factors.

The movie begins with a historical invocation of the region's ancient past, mentioning how during the reigns of dynasties like Ikshvakus, Mauryan, Chalukyas, and Kakatiyas people co-existed in harmony, speaking a variety of languages including Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, and Hindi. The "native" dynasties are painted as peaceful and harmonious, while the arrival of the "Islamic rulers" is depicted as ushering in a period of suffering. It narrates how, with the coming of the Bahmani Sultan, Persian was forcefully imposed on the region. This mention of linguistic impositions clearly feeds

[8] Taylor C. Sherman, *Muslim Belonging in Secular India: Negotiating Citizenship in Postcolonial Hyderabad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

[9] Sowmya Rajendran, "Razakar is a rabid Hindutva project that uses horrifying violence to peddle hate," *The News Minute*, April 26, 2024. https://www.thenewsminute.com/flix/razakar-is-a-rabid-hindutva-project-that-uses-horrifying-violence-to-peddle-hate.

[10] M Ravibabu, "How the Movie 'Razakar-Silent Genocide of Hyderabad' Sets Out to Distort History," *The Wire*, October 17, 2023, https://thewire.in/film/how-the-movie-razakar-silent-genocide-of-hyderabad-sets-out-to-distort-history.

into the debate over linguistic identities that have occupied the political sphere of the region since the twentieth century.

The Nizam Shahi dynasty's establishment is said to have been accompanied by excessive taxation, and its alliance with the British degraded the "subjects into servants." The brutal suppression of the Gond rebellion against "Nizam's brutality" also finds mention in the movie, depicting how it was a great "massacre" that preceded the incident at Jallianwala Bagh. By drawing this parallel, the film attempts to embed regional history into the grand narrative of the mainstream Indian National movement. This opening sequence thus serves as a clear indication of how the film attempts to boil down the entire history of the region to a communal narrative.

This is followed by the introduction of the Nizam's character (played by Makarand Deshpande) as a meek, shrewd, and religiously motivated ruler. The film claims that his rule was a period of "religious terrorism," with multiple references to his aim to establish "Turkistan." However, the ultimate villain who is placed at the receiving end of the audience's contempt is Karim Razvis' character (played by Raj Arjun), with multiple scenes of his correspondence with Pakistan's military forces. His religious extremism is highlighted as he gives multiple instructions to his forces for spreading Islam to make Hyderabad a place where only Muslims would live, establishing mosques, and banning all other languages except Persian.

More importantly, the film is heaped with prolonged action sequences showing the violence that the Razakars inflicted on what is understood to be a helpless Hindu population. There are multiple scenes of violence against children, abduction and rape of women, and forced conversions through genital mutilation, all while continually invoking the "jihadi" history of Islam. There is a special focus on the violence perpetrated on women, which fits well within the ideological construction of the honour of a community residing in the body of its women, and a violation of this body is viewed as an attack on the strength and capability of the men of that community.

While the violence that the Razakars inflicted on the population of Hyderabad is a historical fact, the ahistoric characterisation of the film lies in how the violence is portrayed- as being carried out along purely communal lines. A

critical examination of the emergence and operation of this organisation reveals a reality that is multi-layered and more complex. Established in 1929, they emerged as a "self-defense" wing of the MIM, a typical feature of Indian politics in the period under discussion. Like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist paramilitary group, the Razakars received great public support as the frequency and severity of Hindu-Muslim violence increased across India from 1946.[11]

After the partition of the country, the majority of India's Muslim leadership moved to Pakistan. During this tumultuous period, "the notion of kingship (and Muslim nationhood) suggested by the alliance between the MIM and the Nizam was an attempt to fashion a new basis for Muslim political authority on the subcontinent." It is essential to note that their notion of a Muslim nationhood, "*ana 'l-malik*" (literally, "we are rulers"), held that the sovereignty of Hyderabad would rest in the Muslim population of the province rather than the personage of the Nizam. No amount of verbosity can conceal the fact that, between 1943 and 1948, Mir Osman Ali Khan lost control over the administration and became a puppet of the Razakars.[12]

Nevertheless, they were deployed to aid the Nizam's government alongside the Hindu landed classes in the Telangana region, where the Communist Party of India was leading a revolutionary peasant movement. Thus, the main targets of their violence were not identified along communal lines, but along ideological and class lines instead. The movie actively disremembers this historical fact through its amnesia regarding the Communist movement and its unidirectional focus on portraying the violence inflicted upon the Hindu population by the Razakars, depicted as the "private army of the Nizam." A recurring theme in the movie is the repeated exploitation of the Hindu peasant population by the "outsider Muslim" zamindars and *pattedars*, who are termed as the "instruments" of the Nizam.

Chakali Ilamma, a revolutionary leader of the Telangana Rebellion (played by Indraja), is presented heroically, but her Communist associations are entirely

[11] Sunil Purushottam, "Internal Violence: The "Police Action" in Hyderabad," 441.

[12] Capt. Lingala Pandu Ranga Reddy, "Of Bonds, Broken Promises and Betrayals," *Deccan Chronicle*, September 17, 2019, https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/op-ed/170919/of-bonds-broken-promises-and-betrayals.html.

erased. She is shown as being harassed by a state-appointed landlord or jagirdar, but though he is of the Reddy caste, he is dressed like a Muslim, and is 'saved' by another Reddy who is visibly Hindu.[13] The film woefully ignores that, while the regime was patently pro-Muslim, the rural set-up was bolstered by Hindu upper castes.[14] Thus, the Razakars had taken it upon themselves to persecute individuals, whether Hindu or Muslim, who opposed their vision of Hyderabad's future.[15] This is also shown in only one isolated sequence of the famous journalist Shoebullah Khan of the Urdu newspaper *Imroze*, whose arm was cut off and he was eventually killed.[16]

The movie also does not forget to project the idea of Hinduism as a peaceful religion whose actors used ideology, instead of violence, to fight back the Razakars through peaceful methods such as '*shudhikaran*' (re-conversion). To this end, one particularly evocative scene using religious symbolism is when a cow is shown as successfully defeating the attacking force of the Razakars. At the same time, the movie also narrates how the Hindus fought back to protect their religion by taking the way of organised militarisation. It is here that one can look at the report of Pandit Sunderlal and Qazi Abdulghaffar, prepared in the aftermath of this violence. They recorded that, after 13 September, there had been a widespread anti-Muslim purge, which had occurred primarily in the Marathwada and Telangana areas wherein the Hindu residents, as well as some members of the Army, attacked persons and property, and while conservative estimates suggest that 50,000 Muslims were killed, others claim several hundred thousand died.[17]

The film's ultimate alignment towards the current political regime becomes explicit in the portrayal of Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (played by Tej Sapru). While the former is visualised as a reluctant leader, the latter is shown as a headstrong saviour and unifying force. The taking over of Patel's legacy by the extreme right often forgets the ban he had placed on the RSS in 1948 in order to "root out the forces of hate and violence that are at

[13] Rajendran, "Razakar is a rabid Hindutva project."

[14] Ravibabu, "How the Movie."

[15] Sherman, *Muslim Belonging in Secular India,* 7.

[16] Serish Nanisetti, "Using cinema to stoke communal tensions," *The Hindu*, September 15, 2023, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/using-cinema-to-stoke-communal tensions/article67307190.ece.

[17] Sherman, *Muslim Belonging in Secular India*, 11.

work in our country and imperil the freedom of the Nation and darken her fair name."[18] However, such facts come in the way of framing a villain, so Nehru once again is held responsible for Hindu deaths, and his role in Operation Polo is limited to looking flummoxed and paying subservience to the United Nations.[19] Multiple scenes in the movie attempt to tell the audience that Nehru was not good at decision-making and not worried about the crisis at hand. On the other hand, Patel's character single-handedly shoulders all concerns regarding the "genocide" of the Hindus in Hyderabad and is shown as wanting to "liberate" them.

The makers cunningly employ evocative dialogue-writing to warn the Hindu audience of the disaster that would befall them if Muslims were given any sort of authority. This glaring Islamophobia is seen in the reference to Muslims as "*rakshas"* (demons) and a "disease" which needs to be remedied in order to "save Hyderabad" and establish an "Akhand Bharat." The long sequence in which the Indian Army and Police forces are depicted as the emancipators of the Hindus, and harbingers of harmony, could not have been far from reality. The invasion of Hyderabad had not heralded a new era of communal harmony in the territory; instead, the main task of the new authorities in the state was to cope with the aftermath of the turmoil.[20] To this end, they had detained not just the Razakars but also Hindu militants and Communist leaders, along with anyone else associated with the unrest. The Sunderlal Committee report estimated that, between 1948 and 1951, 2,000 communists were killed by the Indian Army with the help of local landlords, thus reinstating them in their villages.[21]

However, this historical episode is omitted completely since it doesn't sit right with the point that the movie tries to make. It focuses on the abandonment of Hyderabad's cause by Pakistan since it held Kashmir as a priority. Following this, the movie's narrative ends with the entry of the Government of India's forces and their "rescue" of the population of Hyderabad. There is a long

[18] Ministry of Home Affairs (India) "Government Communiqué dated February 4, 1948," cited in *Sardar Patel's Correspondence, 1945-1950*, vol. 6.

[19] Sowmya Rajendran, "Razakar is a rabid Hindutva project."

[20] Sherman, "The Integration of the Princely State of Hyderabad", 499.

[21] Ravibabu, "How the Movie."

sequence of the fall of Pakistan's flag and the chants of *Vande Mataram*, while the closing scene is a cinematic sequence of the Statue of Unity.

The film, thus, becomes successful in fulfilling its true intention—the use of a historical episode for the construction of a stringent "us versus them" narrative which serves to bolster the communal differences of the contemporary era that are accompanied by a heightened sense of identity. The actors, protagonists, and antagonists play their roles in an extremely convincing manner with soul-stirring music to evoke emotions in the audience. Additionally, the fact that it was produced by the ruling party's leader, Gudur Narayan Reddy, also strengthened its case as it was passed by the Censor Board without any edits, and there were appeals for tax exemptions. Some critics hailed the movie as a "seamless, brilliant, honest, and sensitive portrayal of the most brutal terror unleashed by Razakars."[22] However, largely, it was condemned as an extreme attempt of historical distortion by doing away with the complexity of the events it claims to portray. Despite being made on a modest budget, the film rewrites another right-wing Hindutva narrative similar to 'The Kashmir Files' (2022) and 'The Kerala Story' (2023), albeit with less art.[23]

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[23] Prakash Pecheti, "Razakar: Silent Genocide of Hyderabad review: This right-wing Hindutva narrative falls into the 'commercial cinema' trap," *South First*, March 15, 2024, https://thesouthfirst.com/entertainment/razakar-telugu-movie-review/.

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