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# Bureaucratic Erasures: The Archive as a Site of Violence in Postcolonial India

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## Abstract

This paper examines the Indian state archive as a site not of memory preservation but of bureaucratic violence. Challenging the assumption that archives are neutral repositories of truth, it argues that postcolonial India inherited colonial logics of surveillance, classification, and omission, and redeployed them under nationalist narratives of order and development. Through three case studies, the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes Act, the bureaucratization of Partition trauma, and the legal erasure of caste atrocities, the paper demonstrates how state documentation has actively constructed deviance, silenced suffering, and erased marginalized identities from official record. Drawing on archival research, court records, policy documents, and critical theory, the study shows that erasure in the archive is not accidental; it is produced through paperwork, procedural language, and strategic silence. The paper also reflects on the ethical limits of working with state records and highlights the need for counter-archives rooted in community knowledge and oral testimony. Ultimately, it reframes the archive as a terrain of struggle—one that determines who is seen, who is forgotten, and whose pain is deemed legible. In doing so, it calls for a reimagining of archival ethics, not just to correct the past, but to shape a more accountable future.

**Keywords:** postcolonial archive, bureaucratic violence, bureaucracy, postcolonial memory, erasure, state power, structural violence, surveillance

## 1. Introduction

This research began with a simple question: how does a state remember, and what does it choose to forget? At first, the focus was on identifying patterns in the bureaucratic organization of postcolonial Indian archives. The expectation was to

find the usual tensions between transparency and red tape, or between truth and state narrative. But the findings were more unsettling. As policy documents, gazettes, court records, and government circulars were examined more closely, it became increasingly evident that the archive was not simply a repository; it was a weapon (Stoler, 2009). Not metaphorically, but materially. It could criminalize, erase, obscure, and sanction. It could assign deviance or erase suffering. It could make a person, or an entire community, disappear.

Archives are typically imagined as places of preservation. They are treated as neutral, institutional storehouses of memory. Scholars, journalists, and policymakers often turn to them seeking a stable record of the past. The archive, in this dominant framing, is a site of access, transparency, and historical continuity. But this assumption collapses under scrutiny (Derrida, 1996; Stoler, 2009). Archives are not passive. They are constructed, curated, and constantly revised. They reflect the biases of those who built them and serve the purposes of those who control them. They are governed by inclusion and exclusion, by what is considered worth preserving and what is not.

In India, these tensions are intensified by the country's colonial legacy. When independence arrived in 1947, the administrative infrastructure of the British Raj did not vanish; it was inherited. The newly sovereign state retained much of the colonial logic of documentation, surveillance, and classification (Gupta, 2012). In fact, it often doubled down. The language changed from "civilizing mission" to "development," but the bureaucratic machinery remained familiar. The result was that the postcolonial archive did not cleanse itself of imperial power. It absorbed it, often uncritically.

This paper examines how the archives in postcolonial India enact violence through bureaucratic mechanisms of omission and classification. By tracing the afterlife of colonial policies, the bureaucratization of Partition trauma, and the legal erasure of caste atrocities, it examines how state record-keeping both shapes and distorts historical memory.

This paper argues that in postcolonial India, the archive has not merely preserved state memory; it has actively enacted violence through bureaucratic erasure. That violence is not spectacular, it is structural. It operates through the slow, quiet, and accumulative power of paper. Through selective documentation, distortion, and silence, the archive marginalizes entire communities. Nomadic tribes become "habitual offenders," Partition refugees are reduced to statistical entries, and caste atrocities are reworded as "local disturbances." The violence is in the framing, in the form, in the omission (Foucault, 1977; Gupta, 2012).

Drawing on state documents, legal records, and critical theory, the archive is framed not as a passive storehouse but as an active site of epistemic and political control. It becomes a space where power is both stored and exercised (Foucault, 1977; Stoler, 2009). This analysis focuses on three case studies: the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes Act, the bureaucratization of Partition trauma, and the legal erasure of caste atrocities. Each case reveals how archival practices shape not only what is remembered, but how it is remembered—and, crucially, who is remembered.

This project remains conscious of the researcher's relationship to the archive. Institutional access and the privilege of academic inquiry allow certain files to be opened that remain closed to others (Burton, 2005). Yet this access also implies complicity in the very systems under critique. Archival documents speak about people but rarely with them. Visibility is granted to some only because others have been systematically denied it. That tension is not merely intellectual; it is ethical. It influences which questions are asked, which silences are noticed, and which conclusions demand caution (Das, 2007).

Ultimately, this paper seeks to shift how archives are understood—not as dusty repositories of objective truth, but as dynamic, contested, and often violent terrains. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a growing body of work that reconsiders



how power lives on—not only in laws or borders, but in the quiet authority of bureaucratic memory (Derrida, 1996; 61 Gupta, 2012).

## 2. Literature Review

To understand the archive as a site of violence, this analysis turns first to foundational archive theory. Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge-power is instrumental in reframing bureaucratic documents not as reflections of truth, but as instruments that produce truth within systems of power (Foucault, 1977). His idea that knowledge is both a product and a mechanism of power opens up a new reading of the Indian archive. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how institutions classify and discipline through subtle practices (Foucault, 1977). Bureaucracies do not just store information—they enforce norms through classification. In the context of state documents, this means that forms, registers, and classifications are not neutral; they are mechanisms through which the state defines, polices, and reproduces social order (Foucault, 1972).

This becomes particularly salient when analyzing how particular communities, especially Dalits, denotified tribes, and Partition survivors, are described. Their presence in the archive is not a recognition, but a labeling, often tied to suspicion or deficiency (Stoler, 2009). Foucault's analysis helps illuminate the mechanisms by which a document that appears objective, like a census record or a legal filing, participates in the state's broader disciplinary regimes (Foucault, 1977).

Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* adds another layer. Where Foucault is systemic, Derrida is more intimate, even neurotic. He writes about the archive not only as an institution, but as a site of compulsion—a place where states and scholars seek permanence in the face of decay (Derrida, 1996). His famous line, "There is no political power without control of the archive," speaks directly to the logic of bureaucratic preservation (Derrida, 1996, p. 4). The desire to fix memory, to make it stable and recoverable, is itself a political act. The archive does not merely preserve; it imposes.

Derrida's focus on the "law of the archive," that it is always governed by institutional authority, is especially clarifying. In the case of postcolonial India, this involves understanding how the independent state, while rhetorically divorced from its colonial predecessor, often carries forward the legal and bureaucratic frameworks of empire. The archive's legal authority becomes a way to render some claims visible and legitimate, while others remain absent, unfiled, or deliberately lost.

Ann Stoler's work serves as the hinge that connects continental theories to the postcolonial and specifically South Asian context. In *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler insists on reading colonial archives not just for what they say, but for how they say it—their textures, repetitions, gaps, and bureaucratic obsessions. She argues that archives are not repositories of empire; they are technologies of rule (Stoler, 2009, p. 20). Her concept of "aphasia"—the inability of the archive to speak about certain forms of suffering, even as it meticulously documents them—proves particularly useful in examining records of caste violence or Partition trauma. Such events are frequently recorded not through testimonies or confessions, but through administrative shorthand, legal evasions, and numeric abstraction.

Stoler's methodological contributions also prompt a treatment of the archive as a space of affect and anxiety. Bureaucracies do not simply reflect ideology—they leak, stall, and double back on themselves. Her insights encourage attention to elements often dismissed as noise: contradictory memos, missing signatures, and crossed-out entries. These are not errors—they are part of the archive's structural logic (Stoler, 2009).

Antoinette Burton extends this critique by foregrounding gender and absence. She asks: who gets archived, and under what terms? Her work on colonial women's lives, and the absence of their voices in official records, highlights parallel silences in the Indian postcolonial archive (Burton, 2005). Women abducted during Partition, for example, are logged as "cases" or "recoveries," but their own voices are systematically excluded. The archive renders them visible only through bureaucratic



categories, not through testimony. Burton also emphasizes that archives are not inevitable; they are constructed. Decisions about what to save, what to discard, and what to classify as sensitive are acts of political judgment. In this sense, the archive is not just shaped by history; it actively shapes history itself (Burton, 2005).

Turning to postcolonial memory studies, Veena Das offers a crucial conceptual lens. In *Life and Words*, she explores how violence continues in everyday life—not only as trauma but as a mode of living (Das, 2007). Bureaucratic erasure does not end with the file; it persists in the silences of survivors and in the ways, communities internalize their own invisibility. Her emphasis on the banal, the routine, and the ordinary resonates strongly with the ways documents reduce extraordinary suffering to checkboxes or incident codes.

Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* is equally significant. Partition is not treated as a resolved historical event, but rather as a site of contested memory—a space where official history and lived experience are often in conflict (Pandey, 2001). Pandey's insistence on fragmentation, that the past cannot be told in full, nor should it be, is a necessary corrective to the archive's pretensions of completeness. Archival documents, under this lens, are not definitive accounts but partial, ideologically saturated texts that reflect more about the priorities of the state than the realities they purport to capture.

Akhil Gupta brings the discussion back to material practices. In *Red Tape*, Gupta explores how bureaucracy functions as a form of structural violence (Gupta, 2012). Ordinary procedures like filing delays, missing documents, rejected applications become life-altering for the poor and marginalized. His analysis provides a critical vocabulary for understanding “slow violence” in bureaucratic systems: not always spectacular, but nonetheless devastating. A misfiled form might lead to eviction; the absence of a caste identifier can prevent a hate crime from being prosecuted appropriately.

Arjun Appadurai, in his work on the right to research and vernacular cosmopolitanism, emphasizes the political dimensions of knowledge production. He poses a fundamental question: who has the right to document, to archive, to write history? His call for “deep democracy” in knowledge production resonates with ongoing efforts in India to foster community archiving, oral history projects, and counter-documentation (Appadurai, 2006). His insights emphasize that archival access is a form of privilege, and that democratizing knowledge means not just declassifying files, but reimagining what counts as a document.

Together, these thinkers form the intellectual scaffolding for this research. Yet a recurring gap in the literature becomes apparent. While the colonial archive has been extensively critiqued, there is less sustained attention on how postcolonial states inherit and adapt those archival logics. The focus on empire often ends in 1947. The present inquiry is concerned with what happens after.

How does a newly sovereign state adopt the tools of empire to build its own national memory? What ideologies justify continued surveillance of denotified tribes? Why do court records continue to erase caste? Why are Partition survivors remembered as data, not as voices? These questions emerge directly from the provocations of existing scholarship.

This paper does not seek to dismiss the colonial legacy. Rather, it asks how that legacy mutates under the banner of national sovereignty. The violence of the archive lies not only in what it contains but also in what it makes impossible to record (Stoler, 2009; Gupta, 2012; Das, 2007).

### 3. Methods and Materials

This study is grounded in a triangulated methodology, drawing from archival research, critical textual analysis, and comparative historical reading. These methods were selected not only for their academic rigor but because they allow for the kind of slow, attentive reading that this topic demands. The archive rarely gives up its truths easily. Silence, misfilings, and



contradictions must be read as data points rather than anomalies (Stoler, 2009).

The core of the research engages with government documents produced between 1947 and the early 1980s. These include post-independence gazettes, internal circulars, police manuals, and Ministry of Home Affairs reports. Particular focus was placed on circulars related to surveillance and control, which frequently replicated colonial logic with minimal revision. In several instances, postcolonial orders were found to be direct reissues of British-era directives, with only the dates changed and colonial signatures removed (Gupta, 2012; Nigam, 1990; Radhakrishna, 2001).

Court judgments also featured heavily in this work, particularly from lower courts where caste and tribal cases were heard.

These texts, while dense and procedurally repetitive, revealed how legal neutrality masks structural bias. What stood out was how often caste was elided in cases that community activists had identified as caste atrocities. The documents themselves became arguments—arguments suggesting that caste was not the issue, or that the crime was merely "interpersonal."

Census records offered another window into bureaucratic world-making. Enumeration guidelines and training manuals from the 1951 and 1961 censuses were reviewed. These records were telling—not only for what they asked (name, occupation, religion, language), but for what they ignored (caste, trauma, displacement). In some cases, enumerators were instructed not to record certain kinds of answers. It became clear that absence was being enforced at the point of data collection.

Refugee registration forms and property claim files from the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation were also reviewed. These documents were clinical, procedural, and almost entirely devoid of emotional language. Even in cases involving mass displacement, murder, and sexual violence, the archive maintained its neutral tone. Some forms were marked with phrases like "unfit for repatriation" or "status pending," attached to stories that could only be partially reconstructed.

These primary sources were supplemented by media reports, NGO documentation, and community testimony published in secondary literature. This research engaged deeply with archives compiled by activist organizations, oral history collectives, and independent scholars working outside formal academic institutions. These community-driven sources added crucial complexity to the state's narrative and provided alternative frameworks for interpreting its omissions.

Archival access itself became a site of investigation. At the National Archives of India, gatekeeping occurred in both expected and unexpected ways. Some documents were simply not listed; others were labeled as "not available for consultation." In one case, a file was reported as "misplaced," yet excerpts from it later appeared in a published book by a government-aligned historian. This inconsistency of access was not random—it reinforced the state's control over historical narrative.

The research approach was shaped by Ann Stoler's insistence on reading along the archival grain (Stoler, 2009), as well as Antoinette Burton's focus on what the archive structurally cannot contain (Burton, 2005). Particular attention was paid to language, tone, handwriting, and marginal notes. A smudged signature, a redacted sentence, or a handwritten correction often revealed more than the document's official content.

Comparative methods were also employed, placing colonial-era policies alongside postcolonial ones. This proved especially effective in tracing the afterlife of the Criminal Tribes Act. What emerged were not ruptures, but echoes—surveillance continued, labels persisted, and forms changed only cosmetically.

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations and ethics of this work. This research was conducted from a position of institutional access, English-language fluency, and support from academic libraries—privileges that directly shaped what could be seen, analyzed, and interpreted. Even as the project critiques archival systems, it remains dependent on their



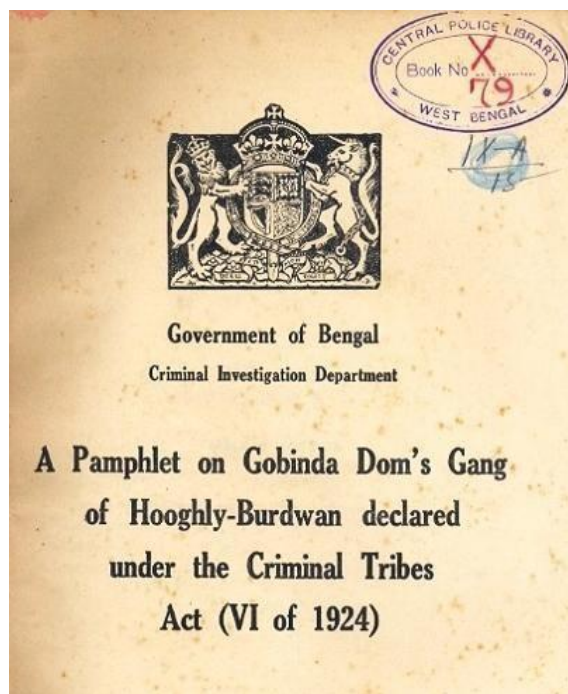
structures.

At the same time, several methodological challenges constrained this work. Key archival files, particularly those relating to ongoing legal cases, were withheld under “confidential” classifications or labeled as “pending review” with no release date. Some collections, especially district-level court archives, contained incomplete case bundles where evidentiary sections were missing, pages were misfiled, or documents were damaged beyond legibility. In other instances, records were available only in regional languages for which no official translation existed, necessitating reliance on intermediary summaries that may have introduced interpretive gaps. These barriers are not mere logistical inconveniences; they are structurally produced silences that mirror the very dynamics of omission and erasure under study.

The archive is not a neutral terrain. It is a contested and contingent space. And so, this methods section is not just a technical account of sources—it is a record of struggle. A struggle to see what is hidden, to name what is unspoken, and to read what the state hopes will remain unread.

### Case Study 1: The Criminal Tribes Act and Its Afterlife

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a product of British colonial governance, institutionalized the belief that certain communities were biologically predisposed to crime (Radhakrishna, 2001; see Figure 1). This law did not merely criminalize individuals; it criminalized lineage. Entire communities, particularly nomadic tribes, Dalits, and indigenous groups, were surveilled, registered, and confined based on inherited suspicion. The state’s assumption was not that individuals committed crimes, but that crime was a hereditary trait passed down by birth. This racialized and caste-coded logic justified extreme surveillance and exclusion (Radhakrishna, 2001; Nigam, 1990).



**Figure 1:** Title page of a colonial-era pamphlet produced by the Government of Bengal Criminal Investigation Department, documenting “Gobinda Dom’s Gang” under the Criminal Tribes Act (VI of 1924).

Note: inherently criminal, institutionalizing suspicion through legal and bureaucratic language. The logic of this Act persisted well into the postcolonial surveillance of denotified tribes. Reprinted from the British Library archives (public domain).

The CTA created an entire ecosystem of surveillance (**Figure 2**), illustrating how communities were monitored as collectives rather than individuals. These documents were not passive reflections of a community's actions—they were tools that constructed criminality. If you were born into a “notified” tribe, your criminality was presumed.

The paperwork didn't just document suspicion; it produced it. Police reports would reference individuals as “notorious” or “likely to offend” without evidence. The language of these registers, phrases like “known for theft,” “incorrigible,” or “requires monitoring,” was rooted less in incident and more in colonial pseudoscience and administrative convenience.



**Figure 2:** Archival photograph depicting members of a denotified tribe in colonial India, shown carrying their belongings under police observation.

*Note:* Images such as this one illustrate how surveillance and criminalization were not abstract policies but visible, everyday realities for targeted communities. Even after “denotification,” these groups remained subject to constant monitoring, reinforcing their exclusion from civic belonging. Historical photo reproduced for educational use.

When the CTA was repealed in 1952, the moment was celebrated as a rupture—a symbolic severing from colonial pasts. But in practice, it was closer to a cosmetic change. The same year, the independent Indian state enacted the Habitual Offenders Act (HOA). While the HOA claimed to target individual repeat offenders based on demonstrable criminal records, in effect it reproduced the very mechanisms of the CTA. Communities previously labeled “criminal” under the British continued to be monitored (Radhakrishna, 2001). Their names remained in local police records, and their presence in a town still triggered reports, raids, and arbitrary arrests (Brown, 2001; Major, 1999).

A 1976 circular from the Home Department of Madhya Pradesh was uncovered during the course of this research. It advised district magistrates to “keep a close watch” on denotified tribe (DNT) settlements and to “report unusual gatherings.” The language in the memo was bureaucratic, but its implications were clear. Surveillance was not based on any reported crime—it was based on community identity. Even more troubling, the circular cited disturbances from decades prior, some stretching back to colonial times, as justification. Bureaucratic memory functioned here as prejudice encoded in official language.

Registers from the 1960s and 70s were also examined, many of which continued to list denotified tribes (DNTs) as “under watch.” One particularly revealing document was a 1963 police ledger from Maharashtra that labeled entire hamlets as “sensitive,” based on their historical CTA status. Shockingly, that ledger was still referenced in a 1992 internal police report following a petty theft incident. No updated assessments had been made. No individual responsibility was considered. The logic was circular: they were watched because they were listed, and they were listed because they had been watched.

What was perhaps most disturbing was the absence of any formal mechanism for challenging or correcting these listings. Individuals misidentified as habitual offenders had no clear legal recourse. To be removed from the register often required both proof of innocence and the ability to navigate a labyrinthine legal system; barriers nearly insurmountable for marginalized communities. In one case recounted in a secondary source, a man wrongly labeled as a habitual offender spent fifteen years being denied public employment and housing until his case was taken up by a legal aid NGO. Even then, his name remained in some internal registries.

The implications of these bureaucratic afterlives are staggering. For denotified tribes, post-independence India did not mean liberation from surveillance. Instead, it meant the continuity of criminalization under a new national banner. Independence promised rights, dignity, and citizenship; what many DNTs received was ongoing stigmatization backed by paper.

Archival records related to these laws are rife with inconsistencies, euphemisms, and omissions. In some cases, local police stations created their own informal lists, unaudited and unregulated. Handwritten registers found in district archives included columns labeled “Community,” “Suspicion,” and “Known Associates.” These were not official CTA-era relics—they were created in the 1980s. The implication was clear: the mindset had outlived the law.

Equally significant is what’s missing from the archive. The voices of DNTs, how they understood this surveillance, how it shaped their lives, are virtually absent. Very few testimonies have been formally recorded or archived. When DNTs appear in the record, they do so as suspects, subjects of surveillance, or beneficiaries of “rehabilitation schemes,” never as narrators of their own experience. Their legal invisibility is mirrored by an archival silence.

This case illustrates how archival violence does not require deletion. It can operate through retention—keeping alive the traces of a stigma no law has officially endorsed. The repetition of outdated records, the bureaucratic recycling of colonial language, and the absence of corrective infrastructure all serve to sustain a state of inherited criminality. Archival continuity here is not about memory; it is about power.

What does it mean for a community to be remembered only as a threat? What kind of citizenship is possible when the paperwork of the state refuses to forget your supposed deviance? These are not rhetorical questions; they are the lived reality of many denotified tribes in India. Their status may have changed in law, but in the files, in the ledgers, and in the minds of officials, they remain suspect.

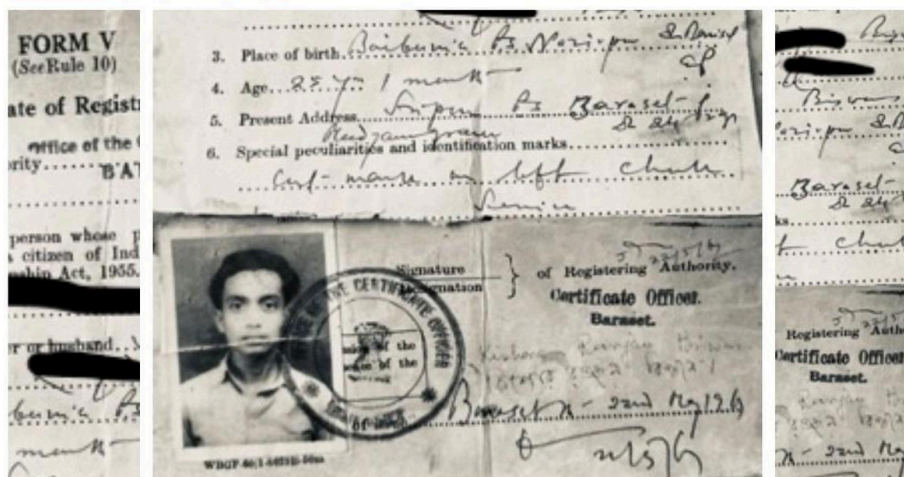
In sum, the afterlife of the CTA is a testament to how bureaucratic structures outlive their formal repeal. The HOA may not name communities, but the communities know they are still targeted. The archive has not cleared them; it has continued to indict them. As long as these records persist, unexamined, unchallenged, the specter of the CTA remains very much alive. This persistent surveillance was not an isolated legacy but echoed across other state archives, including those that managed mass displacement and violence during Partition.



## Case Study 2: Partition Archives and the State's Silences

Partition produced one of the largest forced migrations in human history, accompanied by staggering violence, the scope of which continues to resist full representation. Millions were uprooted from their homes, thousands were killed, and women across religious and regional boundaries were abducted, raped, or forced into displacement. And yet, the Indian state's documentation of this trauma was bureaucratic to the point of dehumanization.

A review of state-generated refugee resettlement forms, ration card applications, and claim files for lost property revealed that the archive spoke in spreadsheets, not stories (see **Figure 3**). It preserved the logistics of nation-building but suppressed the human cost. Each document was a ledger of absence, what was lost, what was claimed, but never who was lost, or how. This was not accidental. It was a bureaucratic strategy that enabled the Indian state to present the Partition as a challenge that was administratively managed, rather than morally catastrophic.



**Figure 3:** Partition-era refugee identification document issued by the Government of India during resettlement efforts.

Note: This document demonstrates how displacement was bureaucratically managed through standardized forms. Details such as age, “peculiarities,” and birthplace were recorded, while refugees’ own narratives of loss and trauma were excluded. The administrative language reduced lived experience to a set of categories, reflecting the archive’s role in shaping whose stories were recognized. Obtained from the Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation.

One archival file listed abducted women according to region and religion, but provided no names—only numbers. Even the categories used were administrative: “recovered,” “non-returned,” “refused repatriation.” These terms rendered human beings into bureaucratic artifacts. A woman who had been abducted and later refused to return to her natal home was marked as “problematic” or “compromised.” The state’s concern was sovereignty, not subjectivity. Internal memos from the period questioned whether certain women “still held patriotic allegiance,” as if trauma could be indexed by national loyalty.

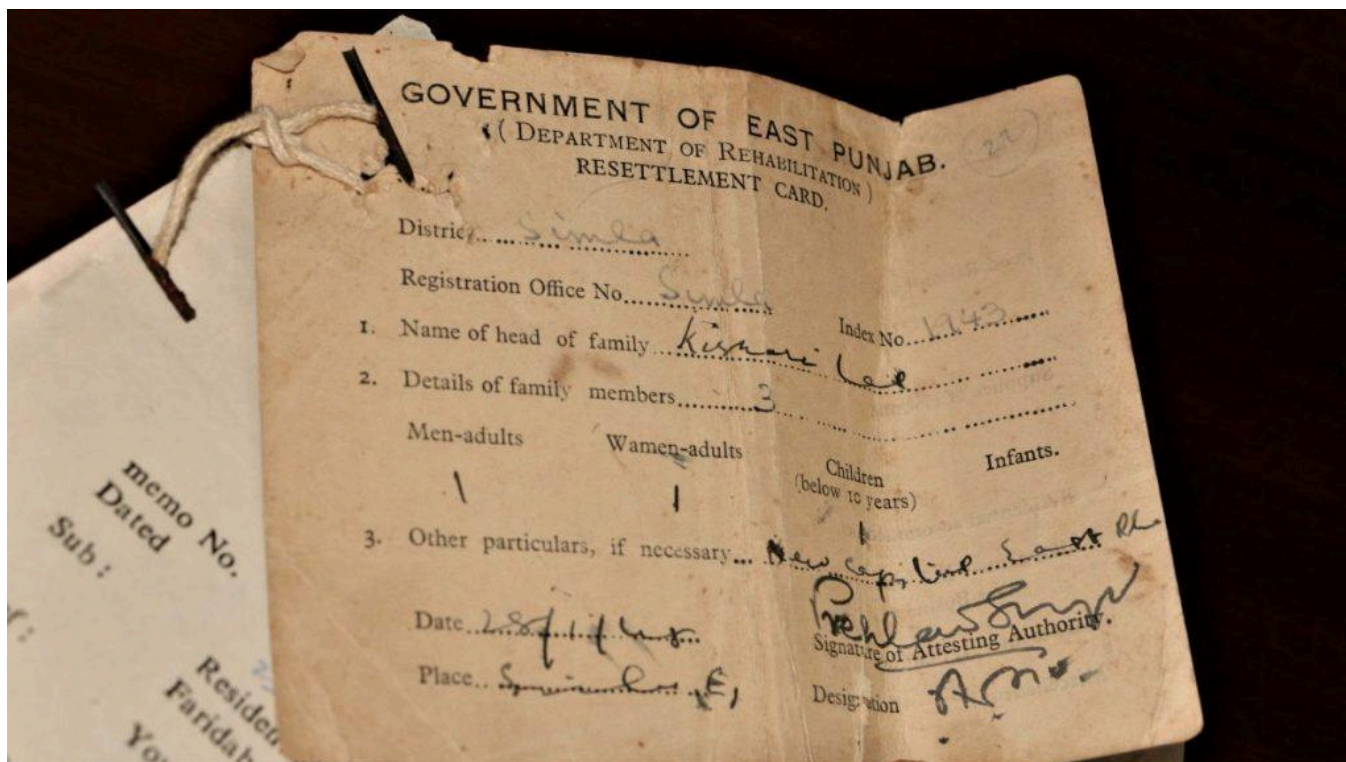
Muslim refugees who fled to Pakistan were rarely included in these narratives—except as “evacuees.” This term was legalistic and cold, devoid of the political and emotional realities of forced migration. The archive does not mourn them; it manages their departure. And Dalit survivors of Partition are almost entirely missing from the bureaucratic record. Though caste would have shaped every dimension of their flight, access to transport, reception in camps, treatment by relief officers, it is mentioned only when it justified exclusion. One resettlement form documented the denial of agricultural land to a Dalit

family on the grounds of their “unsuitability for cultivation.” Caste was invoked only as a disqualifier, never as a form of compounded vulnerability.

Gendered erasure was even more pronounced. The state treated women not as subjects of violence but as symbols of national honor (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Recovery efforts—largely coordinated by male bureaucrats and police—focused on restoring women to their “rightful” communities, often against their will (Butalia, 2000). In several documented cases, women who had remarried or begun new lives were forcibly returned to natal homes that subsequently rejected them (Zamindar, 2007).

A particularly jarring document from 1948, a note from the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, stated: “The return of women must proceed regardless of expressed unwillingness, as the integrity of the state depends on recovery statistics.” That single sentence collapsed any illusion that the archive was apolitical. It revealed the role of documentation in converting trauma into metrics. A woman’s consent became irrelevant if her return would contribute to the numerical logic of state redemption.

This tendency extended to property claims as well. Families filing for compensation had to list property lost ‘in precise monetary terms’ (Figure 4), reinforcing the archival focus on material over emotional loss. There were no forms for grief, or trauma, or lost community. Only what could be valued in rupees could be recorded. In one case, a man who had witnessed the massacre of his family tried to submit a written narrative along with his claim. It was returned to him, marked “not relevant to application process.”



**Figure 4:** Resettlement certificate issued by the Government of East Punjab documenting family composition and relocation

Note: This form illustrates how refugee identity and claims to land were reduced to bureaucratic entries, leaving little space for personal testimony or the trauma of displacement. The sparse fields and official language exemplify how administrative records transformed complex human experiences into simplified data points. Obtained from the National Archives of India, Bengal Partition Records.

status after Partition.

This silence served a function. It allowed the postcolonial state to project competence, control, and humanitarian success. Bureaucracy sanitized the horror of Partition (Burton, 2005; Derrida, 1996; Foucault, 1972). The trauma of mass displacement and communal slaughter was repackaged as logistical efficiency; camp statistics, food rations, train schedules (Government of India, 1948; National Archives of India, 1951 & 1961). In the national archive, the messiness of human suffering is overwritten by the order of forms and columns (Stoler, 2009; Das, 2007).

One of the more subtle yet devastating aspects of this silence is how it shaped future memory. For decades, Partition survivors relied on oral histories, family lore, or community archives to remember. The state's archive made no space for rage or mourning. It created an official silence that was difficult to contest because it was so procedural. A "missing person's form" might record a name, but not how they went missing, or what efforts were made to search. Women whose bodies were never recovered were listed as "untraceable," a bureaucratic disappearance.

The silences in the Partition archive also ripple outward. They affect the kinds of histories that can be written, the kinds of reparations that can be imagined. How do you advocate for redress when the archive does not record your suffering? How do you claim justice when the forms never asked for your name?

Even in contemporary debates about Partition memory, these absences persist. Most national commemorations focus on "independence" rather than "division" (Butalia, 1998; Pandey, 2001). Memorials, when they exist, often reproduce sanitized narratives (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). The bureaucratic archive becomes not just a repository of state priorities but a barrier to alternative histories. Scholars and activists who seek to document gendered, caste-based, or minority experiences of Partition must work around, rather than within, the state archive.

In this way, the Partition archive performs a double violence. It erases the marginalized in its omissions and then legitimizes that erasure through its apparent neutrality. The file, the form, the spreadsheet all claim objectivity. But their exclusions are deeply political.

The archive, then, is not just incomplete, it is structured to be incomplete. It is not just silent; it is designed to silence. And until we grapple with that structure, the memory of Partition will remain fractured, not because people forgot, but because the state never allowed them to fully remember.

As with the Partition archive, bureaucratic reductionism continues in the legal archive, where the elision of caste recasts systemic violence as individual pathology.

### **Case Study 3: Caste Atrocities and the Legal Archive**

Among all areas examined, the erasure of caste violence from the legal archive emerged as the most contemporary and perhaps the most corrosively persistent. While the Criminal Tribes Act and the Partition recovery regime are often discussed as past chapters in India's bureaucratic history, the silencing of caste atrocity through legal formalism is ongoing (Banerjee, 2008; Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Nigam, 1990). Here, the violence of the archive lies not in misrepresentation, but in omission—in what it refuses to name, record, or contextualize.

Police First Information Reports (FIRs) and court judgments in cases of caste-based violence routinely omit references to caste, even when it is the organizing principle of the violence itself. Across readings of cases from Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh, sanitized descriptions of lynchings, rapes, and arson frequently appeared as "personal



disputes” or “property disagreements.” Assaults were minimized as “group scuffles.” Murders became “unexplained deaths.” The effect is chilling: the legal archive presents a country where caste violence does not exist.

Consider the 2006 Khairlanji massacre, a widely publicized case of caste atrocity in Maharashtra, in which members of the Bhotmange family, a Dalit agricultural household, were targeted by upper-caste villagers following a dispute over land boundaries and long-standing caste hostility (Teltumbde, 2010; Guru, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2009). On September 29, 2006, Surekha Bhotmange and her children were stripped, paraded, beaten, raped, and murdered by a mob of men from the dominant caste (Teltumbde, 2010). The brutality sparked national outrage and protests by Dalit rights groups (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2003). Yet the initial police report framed the killings as a revenge attack over land, making no mention of caste. Court documents emphasized the lack of “clear caste animus” and focused on inconsistencies in witness statements (Guru, 2009; HRW, 2009; Omvedt, 1994; Rawat, 2012; Teltumbde, 2010).

This case, preserved in the records of a small district court in Uttar Pradesh, involved the public lynching of a Dalit farm laborer on the main street of the village in front of dozens of witnesses (Teltumbde, 2010; National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2003). Local oral histories link the attack to an earlier dispute over access to a communal well, a site where Dalits had long been denied entry by upper-caste landlords (Omvedt, 1994; Rawat, 2012). Usual media investigations and Dalit activists eventually forced a conversation about caste, but even then, the official record remained evasive (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The judgment relied heavily on procedural gaps and failed to apply the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (Government of India, 1989; Government of India, 2015).

This is not an anomaly. A 1998 case from a district archive documented the lynching of a Dalit man in broad daylight in a village known for caste tensions. The FIR stated the cause of death as “injuries sustained during a community altercation.” The accused were acquitted on grounds of insufficient evidence of caste-based motive. The judgment described them as “men of good repute” and noted the “absence of prior enmity.” The fact that they were upper caste landlords and the victim a Dalit laborer was not mentioned once in the final ruling.

What emerges from these records is a legal structure that not only fails to name caste but actively discourages its naming. Police officers often do not include caste identifiers in FIRs unless explicitly instructed. Judicial proceedings prioritize procedural correctness over social context. Prosecutors may avoid arguing caste angles if they fear it will complicate the case. And defense lawyers routinely exploit the lack of explicit documentation to frame the violence as non-discriminatory. As a result, caste atrocity becomes bureaucratically unprovable and therefore legally non-existent.

The case, heard in a trial court in Madhya Pradesh, involved a 19-year-old Dalit woman who testified that she had been abducted and assaulted by three men from the dominant caste. The attack was reported under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act as well as sections of the Indian Penal Code relating to sexual violence (Government of India, 1989; Indian Penal Code, 1860).

It is also evident that language often functions as a shield—protecting institutions from accountability by reframing structural violence as neutral or routine. Words like “village tension,” “grievance,” or “long-standing rivalry” are used to flatten structural hierarchies into interpersonal disputes. Bureaucratic neutrality in this context is not just cowardice; it is complicity. It transforms systemic violence into legal ambiguity.

Another troubling trend is how evidence itself is filtered. Testimonies from Dalit survivors or witnesses are often treated as unreliable. In multiple cases, judgments questioned the “veracity” of Dalit voices due to supposed inconsistencies, even when upper-caste witnesses offered contradictory accounts. One 2011 case involved the dismissal of a Dalit woman’s testimony of



gang rape, in a rural district in Haryana, on the grounds that she “did not appear adequately traumatized.” The court ruled that her emotional expression was “incongruent with the claimed severity of the event.” That phrase, “incongruent with severity,” stands as a chilling example of how the state not only disbelieves marginalized voices but pathologizes their survival.

This epistemic violence extends to record-keeping. In several district court archives, caste atrocity case files were found to be missing, incomplete, or labeled as “disposed” without accessible judgments.

Some were inexplicably absent. Others were labelled “disposed” without accessible judgments. Even when files were retrievable, many were incomplete. Witness statements were summarized rather than quoted, stripping them of nuance and specificity. Police evidence logs were empty. In one 2003 case from Madhya Pradesh, the entire evidentiary section was redacted “pending appeal,” a case that had never been appealed.

The legal archive, then, performs a dual function: it documents law, but also defines what counts as legible violence. When caste is erased, what remains is a narrative of random disorder. This not only denies justice in the present; it distorts history for the future. Researchers reading these files decades from now will find sanitized violence, procedural euphemism, and bureaucratic neutrality. They will not find the realities that communities live with daily.

Equally troubling is how caste atrocity law itself is archived. The Prevention of Atrocities Act, passed in 1989 and amended in 2015, was designed to address the unique nature of caste violence (Government of India, 1989; Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2015). But its application is inconsistent, and its archive sparse (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). The very law meant to counteract caste injustice is often missing from case documentation (Teltumbde, 2018; Kumar, 2020). I searched for cases where the Act had been applied and found that even when it was invoked, it was rarely upheld. Charges were diluted, sections dropped, or procedural loopholes exploited to avoid conviction.

This legal undermining extends into the discourse around “false cases.” Dominant caste media narratives often portray Dalit complainants as misusing the Act. This perception, though unsubstantiated at scale, nevertheless shapes legal culture: influencing how police file reports, how judges interpret evidence, and how even legal aid providers assess credibility (Teltumbde, 2018; Kumar, 2020). In this way, discourse itself becomes a tool of bureaucratic violence, constraining justice before the case even enters the courtroom. As a result, fewer victims come forward. The archive begins to reflect this chilling effect—not as a lack of violence, but as a lack of reporting. Bureaucracy reinterprets this silence as proof that caste violence is declining.

This bureaucratic loop, where absence of data becomes absence of reality, is perhaps the most insidious feature of the legal archive. It privileges official speech and punishes non-conformity. It forgets structurally and remembers selectively. And in doing so, it constructs a nation where caste violence appears episodic, rather than endemic.

The caste archive is a site of profound distortion. It flattens oppression into incident, reduces community trauma to legal mischief, and transforms systemic injustice into statistical error. The damage it does is cumulative and generational. It affects who gets legal aid, whose history is written, and whose suffering is eligible for redress.

In closing, this case study reveals that the violence of the archive is not just in what is erased—but in what is allowed to remain. Sanitized stories. Discredited voices. Legal verdicts that speak in the language of neutrality while legitimizing hierarchy. If justice is memory institutionalized, then the legal archive in India remains a deeply unjust terrain. Taken together with the cases of surveillance and Partition, the legal archive reveals a consistent logic of erasure—where the state reclassifies structural violence as individual deviation, and in doing so, maintains the fiction of neutrality. These case studies are not isolated anomalies, but manifestations of a bureaucratic system built to obscure the very realities it claims to record.



## 4. Discussion

What ties these three case studies together is the archive's deep complicity that lies in violence. This violence does not arrive through dramatic proclamations or overt propaganda. It works through slow, strategic silence.

Across contexts, from the surveillance of denotified tribes, to the bureaucratization of Partition trauma, to the erasure of caste atrocities, the archive emerges as a machine of selective memory, not a neutral repository. It documents and records, but it also omits and forecasts, turning erasure into an active project carried out through the everyday instruments of statecraft: forms, files, circulars, and judicial language.

Drawing on Akhil Gupta's concept of "bureaucratic violence," we begin to understand how the mechanics of administration become tools of harm (Gupta, 2012). They shape visibility and define who can be seen, who can be heard, and whose pain is deemed admissible. Bureaucracy is not merely slow. It strategically defines the borders of legibility. In that sense, the archive functions not as a mirror of reality, but as a gatekeeper, a border guard deciding which truths may cross into national memory. Bureaucracy is not merely slow; it is calibrated. It strategically defines the borders of legibility. In that sense, the archive functions not as a mirror of reality, but as a gatekeeper, a border guard deciding which truths get to cross into national memory.

Consider how caste, for instance, is omitted from police reports and court judgments. That omission is not a clerical oversight; it is a choice shaped by legal conventions, political pressures, and social hierarchies (Guru, 2009; Rawat, 2012). Similarly, the classification of abducted women during Partition as "recovered" or "refused repatriation" was not merely shorthand; it was a way of controlling the narrative of national dignity (Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Butalia, 2000). These omissions and classifications exemplify bureaucratic violence: practices that erase structural harm by reframing it as administrative neutrality. In the case of denotified tribes, records retain the vocabulary of suspicion long after the law has changed. The paper trail outlives the reform.

This is what makes the archive a particularly dangerous site of epistemic violence: it makes its exclusions look like objectivity. A missing testimony is never marked as "excluded" or "denied." It simply vanishes. And the archive continues, uninterrupted, presenting a version of history that seems comprehensive because it is bound, classified, and stamped.

The archive, then, is not just about memory; it is a moral claim. It helps define the boundaries of justice, of legitimacy, and of national belonging. Who gets remembered, and how, is not a trivial issue. It is a foundational one. Archives are not just about what happened; they are about who counts. And when the state refuses to record a people's suffering, it is not merely dismissing their history; it is challenging their very claim to citizenship.

This insight has implications far beyond the Indian context. Across the postcolonial world, newly independent states inherited not just political systems but epistemic infrastructures. The methods of surveillance, documentation, and control honed under colonial rule did not disappear in 1947, 1957, or 1960. They were adopted, rebranded, and embedded in the fabric of governance. The bureaucratic languages of "service," "welfare," "rehabilitation," and "development" often carry within them the residual logics of domination. A ration card can be both a lifeline and a leash.

In this light, archives must be treated not as neutral storehouses of knowledge, but as terrains of struggle. The question must be asked: Who built this archive? For whom was it intended? What kinds of questions can it answer, and which ones has it been designed to evade? Silence in the archive is never just a gap; it is the result of labor, deliberate, structured, and strategic.



Reading the archive “against the grain,” as suggested by scholars like Ann Stoler, means treating its contradictions, silences, and absences as data. It also means being reflexive about one’s own position as a reader. The ability to access certain files, quote from court judgments, and analyze policy documents constitutes a form of institutional privilege. That privilege stands in tension with the stories this research seeks to surface—stories that the state has long worked to erase.

Counter-archives are crucial in this context. Oral histories, community testimonies, grassroots legal documentation, and even folklore offer challenges to the state’s monopoly on memory (Butalia, 2000; Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Gopal, 2019). These alternative repositories are not simply emotional or anecdotal; they are epistemologies in their own right. They challenge the form, tone, and logic of state documentation. They allow for multiplicity, ambiguity, contradiction—things the state archive struggles to accommodate.

However, even counter-archives are not without risk. As they gain visibility, they too become subject to co-optation, regulation, and dismissal. What begins as a radical intervention can be folded into a bureaucratic system that absorbs dissent without changing its structure. That is why a decolonial archival politics must be more than additive. It cannot simply demand “more representation” within existing systems. It must demand new systems entirely; ones built on consent, reciprocity, and accountability.

To envision the archive as a site of justice, rather than domination, we must first acknowledge the violence that has been done in its name. That means tracing not just the content of state records, but their form: who they name, how they classify, what they standardize, and what they leave blank. It means refusing to treat silence as a neutral absence. Silence is a structure, and it has authors.

This recognition also requires us to think politically about methodology. To read an archive is to enter into a relationship with state power; sometimes adversarial, sometimes complicit. The research process, triangulating official records with community sources, analyzing omissions alongside inclusions, and resisting easy coherence, was shaped by that political imperative. The archive does not exist outside politics. Research does not exist outside power.

Ultimately, the question is not simply how we use the archive but how we change it. What would it mean to build an archive that begins with those who were never meant to be remembered? What would it mean to treat oral testimony not as evidence to be verified against a document, but as a document in its own right? What if grief, uncertainty, and ambiguity were not obstacles to truth, but forms of truth themselves?

These are not rhetorical provocations. They are methodological mandates. If we are to create a more just historical record, and by extension, a more just society, we must rethink what we ask of archives. We must move beyond the fantasy of neutrality, and toward a practice of accountability.

Because in the end, the archive does not just remember. It decides what is forgettable. And that decision, more than any fact it contains, is what shapes the world we inherit.

## 5. Conclusion

This research began with a question about memory and concludes with a demand for accountability. The Indian state’s archives are not passive repositories of history. They are sites where history is legislated, identity is bureaucratized, and silence is systematized. These archives do not merely preserve the past. They shape it, curate it, and in doing so, obscure and



erase lives that do not fit the official script.

Across three case studies, this paper has demonstrated that the postcolonial Indian archive functions as an instrument of epistemic and political violence. In the surveillance of denotified tribes, colonial logics of suspicion persisted long after independence, embedded in the banal language of postcolonial circulars and registries.

The archive, in this context, did not reflect reality, it created criminality through repetition, categorization, and refusal to forget. In the case of Partition, the trauma of mass displacement and violence was bureaucratically managed into silence. Forms and files reduced human suffering to statistics. Women were documented as “cases,” not individuals. Grief was standardized; dissent erased. And in the legal archive, caste atrocities are filtered through a language of neutrality that renders structural violence unrecognizable. Murder becomes a “dispute,” and rape a “misunderstanding.” These records do not tell the truth. They tell the state’s version of what truth is allowed to look like.

Together, these examples illustrate a broader argument: the archive does not merely document power; it performs it. Through paperwork, legalese, omission, and euphemism, the archive delineates whose lives are worthy of preservation and whose lives can be forgotten without consequence. It is not the absence of documentation that is most harmful—but the illusion of completeness that bad documentation creates. The file is stamped, the form is filled, and the wound is sealed over.

This insight forces a rethinking of some of the most basic assumptions in historiography and legal studies. We often treat archives as the foundation of knowledge, the starting point for inquiry. But what happens when the foundation is corrupted by exclusion? When the very structure of record-keeping is designed to fail certain people? What is needed, then, is not just a critical reading of archival content, but a critique of archival form. What categories are available? What is unaskable within the language of the state? What does not fit into a field, a checkbox, a court ruling?

Society must also grapple with the real-world implications of archival violence. These are not just abstract concerns. When caste is omitted from legal records, it affects sentencing and acquittal. When refugee trauma is undocumented, it affects compensation and memory. When a denotified tribe remains on a police list decades after legal exoneration, it affects livelihoods, safety, and social inclusion. The archive is not inert. It has teeth.

And so, the call to action is threefold. First, it is essential to support and legitimize counter-archives. Oral histories, community testimonies, non-state records, and activist documentation should be recognized not as supplemental, but as vital sources. These are not footnotes to the “real” archive. They are correctives that carry the authority of lived experience.

Second, institutional record-keeping practices must be reformed. This includes funding community-led documentation projects, declassifying bureaucratic records, and establishing protocols for ethical representation. Legal documents must be reimagined, census forms revised in their approach to identity, and police FIRs drafted with a commitment to inclusion and accuracy. The state must be held accountable not only for what it records, but also for what it systematically erases.

Third, the discourse around archives in public life requires transformation. Archivists must be understood not simply as custodians of documents, but as gatekeepers of justice. Researchers must be recognized not as neutral observers, but as participants in the politics of memory.

This research does not claim to be exhaustive. There are silences that remain beyond the reach of documentation. But that, too, is the point. The limits of what can be known through the archive are not accidents; they are design features. The question is not whether the archive is biased. It is how that bias functions, whom it serves, and what we will do in response.

If the archive has been a site of violence, it can also become a site of repair—but only if there is a collective willingness to



confront what it was built to conceal. That confrontation requires courage, creativity, and solidarity. It requires us to ask: Whose memory matters? Who gets to decide? And what kind of future can we build if we refuse to inherit an erasure?

In the end, this is not just a call for better records. It is a call for a better politics of remembering. Because memory is not just about the past—it decides who gets to be part of the future.

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## Author Biography

**Aiman Khan** is a high school student at The Mother's International School in New Delhi, India, with a strong academic interest in postcolonial studies, archival politics, and the intersections of caste, memory, and state power. She has conducted independent research on the bureaucratic construction of erasure in postcolonial India, engaging in dialogue with prominent historians and university mentors, including Priya Satia, professor of history at Stanford University. Her



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work is informed by close readings of legal records, state documents, and critical theory. Aiman is a regular contributor to student journals and actively works to amplify marginalized voices through archival and narrative projects.

Alongside her academic pursuits, she has participated in numerous national and international academic and leadership programs and has been recognized for excellence in humanities research, debate, and literary initiatives. She is the editor-in-chief of *The Emergency Files*, a national magazine reaching a combined readership of approximately 100,000 students, serves as President of Girl Up For Us, and contributes as an illustrator and editor to her school magazine and the student publication *Navchetna*. Aiman has also volunteered with organizations such as Liberty Foundation, Blind Relief Association, Muskurahat Foundation, UNHCR, and Child Rights & You (CRY), working to engage communities whose voices might otherwise be erased, and ensuring that the lessons of modern history reach those often left at the margins.

In addition to her research and leadership activities, she has been recognized for outstanding proficiency in English through various Olympiads and is a laureate in international academic competitions. She hopes to continue pursuing interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences, with a focus on justice, memory, and historical accountability, while fostering educational access and creative expression for youth.

