

Hidden Custodians of India's Past: Indigenous Contributions to the Discovery and Preservation of Early Indian Inscriptions and Monuments (1750–1947).

Abstract:

The history of Indian archaeology and epigraphy, has been written almost exclusively with colonial actors — the administrators, surveyors, European scholars — at its centre. Such stories have ignored native agency — those who found the sites, provided the knowledge, saved the monuments, deciphered the inscriptions, and directed the excavations. In this paper, we reconstruct a broader period of Indian archaeology and epigraphy from c.1750 to 1947 that accounts for the participation in the construction of archaeological knowledge in colonial India by local temple priests (shevats, pauranas), villages (gramavasis), pandits, munshis, carvers, village guides (mahout), pilgrims, and hereditary communities. Using a series of archival methods, including digging into archives, genealogy, footnoting, the mapping of discovery networks and the reconstruction of discovery networks, we trace their role and place within colonial archaeology in terms of how their activities were reported and recorded in official documents and survey reports. This paper also attempts to treat gaps in archives not as the absence of knowledge but rather as historical traces in order to reconstruct and reconstruct the often-ignored networks and communities involved in the discovery and preservation of monuments and inscriptions in colonial India, with a specific focus on India's celebrated finds in archaeology and epigraphy. It demonstrates how the past of India has always been preserved and recovered in more collaborative and uneven ways that go beyond the official stories, and contributes to the decolonisation of the historiography of South Asian archaeology.

Keywords: *Indigenous custodians, colonial archaeology, Indian epigraphy, Archaeological Survey of India, indigenous intermediaries, heritage preservation, knowledge production, archival silences, decolonial archaeology, subaltern historiography, monuments, inscriptions, colonial India.*

1. Introduction

Since the late eighteenth century, the process of uncovering and protecting India's epigraphical and monumental heritage, such as its temples, Buddhist stupas and sites of archaeology, has remained at the heart of south Asian archaeological history. Colonial scholarship that began in the late eighteenth century through Orientalism and the antiquarian pursuits in the form of colonial institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India, has provided a historiographical framework for the development of the study of the material past of India. Scholars and colonial administrators in the form of William Jones, James Prinsep, Alexander Cunningham, James Burgess and John Faithfull Fleet have been acknowledged as

key actors in building the discipline of Indian archaeology and epigraphy, through their surveys, excavations and decipherment work which shaped the development of modern epigraphical and archaeological practices that defined the idea of India's antiquity (Chakrabarti 1988, Guha-Thakurta 2004, Singh 2004). This narrative has also brought the colonial period of Indian archaeology into focus as a subject for study, as it provides a basis for understanding the development and evolution of modern archaeology in India (Chakrabarti 1998; Guha-Thakurta 2004; Singh 2004). The colonial approach to Indian antiquity, through the study of inscriptions and architecture, has often been viewed as stemming from scientific findings made through colonial research, surveying and the formalization of knowledge practices in the fields of archaeology and epigraphy, as initiated by the colonial administration. Historical accounts of the discovery and preservation of monuments and inscriptions in colonial India typically portray colonial antiquarian interests as bringing ancient monuments and inscriptions into modern scholarly discussion, which had been overlooked or hidden from public awareness by local communities. These historical narratives emphasize the role of colonial administrators, military personnel and institutions in the recovery and protection of India's archaeological remains. These publications also highlight the roles of colonial archaeologists in examining and studying these remains, and their contributions to the fields of epigraphy and archaeology. Consequently, colonial archaeology is often framed as part of the broader mission of the British Empire to recover and preserve the ancient past of India from being forgotten or destroyed (Cohn 1996, Dirks 2001, Guha-Thakurta 2004).

Official histories of Indian epigraphies and archaeology, such as the annual reports of the Archaeological Survey of India, colonial travel writings or antiquarian publications, often emphasize the achievements of colonial archaeologists while giving little attention to the local conditions that made the discovery of India's epigraphical and monumental heritage possible (Chakrabarti 2003).

In colonial Indian historical writing, archaeological and epigraphical remains were seen as subjects of colonial scientific inquiry, while the local circumstances that influenced these discoveries were either ignored or treated as secondary to the colonial narrative (Chakrabarti 2000). However, these archaeological and epigraphical discoveries were not solely the result of the scientific efforts of European scholars. Colonial archaeologists relied heavily on a diverse range of local informants and communities such as local guides, temple priests, village residents, pandits and munshis, skilled artisans, local interpreters, religious pilgrims, local zamindars and hereditary knowledge holders, who identified the sites for excavations and surveys, preserved archaeological remains and inscriptions, shared oral traditions and genealogies, interpreted inscriptions, translated texts, and provided access to inaccessible archaeological sites, located outside of colonial administrative centres in distant rural or tribal regions. Colonial excavators and investigators depended on local communities to identify sites, to access sites, or to identify their antiquarian value to be excavated and studied (Chakrabarti 2003, Guha 1982). Most inscriptions were already known by local communities, and many sites remained in existence even without state intervention because local communities protected sites or inscriptions within a living and dynamic social and religious

context (Guha 1982, Chakrabarti 2003, Guha-Thakurta 2004). While their contributions to the discovery of Indian epigraphies and archaeological remains were significant and crucial to the knowledge production of colonial archaeology, the efforts and work of local communities and individuals were largely erased in archaeological accounts. In official records, they were mentioned only in the form of a 'guide' or 'informant' or 'assistant' (Chakrabarti 2003, Cohn 1996, Guha 1982).

The relative invisibility of indigenous communities and individuals is a significant feature in colonial knowledge production where knowledge production was often shaped by colonial institutions and epistemic practices of knowledge attribution. Colonial historians have shown how historical and colonial knowledge was the result of collective production of knowledge between Europeans and indigenous individuals or communities (Raj 2007; Bayly 1996). Studies in colonial science have highlighted how knowledge in colonial institutions was often the result of knowledge production between European officers and indigenous collaborators rather than solely a unilateral knowledge production in European institutions (Cohn 1996, Raj 2007, Bayly 1996). While colonial intermediaries have been studied by historians of science in a diverse range of areas such as cartography and linguistics (Raj 2007), history of colonial medicine (Nandy 1995, Mukherjee 1997, Ramnath 2011), or colonial administration (Chakrabarti 1989, Chatterjee 1986; Bayly 2005; Dirks 2001; Gupta 2007; Prashad 2001; Cohn 1996), studies in archaeology, art and literature in colonial India have shown very little work on the contributions of local intermediaries in archaeology and archaeometric epigraphy to colonial knowledge (Chakrabarti 2000, 2003; Guha-Thakurta 2004; Sinha 2008; Singh 2004; Thapar 2003).

This article aims to add to the existing academic discussions on the history of Indian archaeology and epigraphy during the colonial period by exploring the role that local communities and individuals played in the study of ancient monuments and inscriptions in India from 1750 to 1947. It focuses on understanding how these local groups were involved in the creation and preservation of archaeological knowledge.

The article identifies and examines the contributions made by local people, including those who acted as intermediaries or knowledge holders, in the context of the colonial production of archaeological and epigraphic knowledge.

Instead of focusing only on well-known figures such as Alexander Cunningham, it explores the wider networks and collaborative efforts that made archaeological and epigraphic studies possible. By emphasizing the role of local communities and individuals, the article highlights how Indian antiquarianism and archaeological history were not solely shaped by colonial institutions and administrators but were also the result of collective and shared efforts. These local actors played a vital role in identifying, preserving, and making accessible ancient remains to state officials through surveys, excavations, and other forms of engagement. The paper outlines three main goals: first, to identify the different types of individuals and communities that were involved in the recovery and preservation of epigraphic remains and architectural monuments during the colonial era.

Second, it seeks to analyze how these communities were included or excluded in official colonial narratives, such as colonial histories, archives, travel accounts, and reports from the Archaeological Survey of India. Third, it aims to examine how local systems of knowledge and stewardship of ancient sites helped in the preservation of monuments and inscriptions, enabling the state to identify, excavate, and study them.

Through these objectives, the paper aims to address a broader question: how was archaeological knowledge in India developed, and what role did local people play in that process. By recovering the contributions of indigenous and local intermediaries, the article contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian archaeology that includes the perspectives of local custodians. This approach helps in developing a historiography that reflects indigenous viewpoints and adds to the field of decolonial knowledge studies.

The article also contributes to discussions on the ways in which knowledge is created, distributed, and shaped, as well as the political aspects of historiography and knowledge production.

It highlights the social contexts and cultural networks that supported the recovery and conservation of India's archaeological heritage, which is often overlooked in traditional narratives. By reinterpreting the history of archaeological discovery and its role in the development of modern epigraphy and archaeology, the paper questions dominant colonial narratives and contributes to a more inclusive historiography of heritage conservation that includes both state and non-state actors.

It also supports the broader effort of re-making colonial history and rethinking the role of colonialism in shaping Indian antiquarianism. In doing so, it challenges the traditional view that colonial institutions were the sole contributors to archaeological discoveries, and instead emphasizes the role of local communities in preserving and protecting ancient sites. This recovery of these narratives helps to shift the focus of archaeological historiography and includes previously ignored voices in the history of Indian archaeology and epigraphy.

2. Literature Review and Historiographical Debate

The historiography of Indian archaeology has largely been shaped by work exploring the development of archaeology as part of colonial government and knowledge production. This work has shown that archaeological research in British India was often closely linked to questions of governance, cartography, imperialism, civilizational origins, and the role of Britain in India's past (Chakrabarti 1988; Cohn 1996; Guha-Thakurta 2004). The founding of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) by Alexander Cunningham in 1861 formalized and systematized archaeological research and led to extensive survey, recording, and conservation work that continues to impact Indian archaeology (Singh 2004).

However, much of this work focuses on colonial institutions, scholars, and state archaeology, often reproducing a top-down view of archaeological practice. The history of Indian epigraphy has similarly focused on the contributions of Orientalist and colonial scholars. The

translation of the Brahmi and Kharosthi inscriptions by James Prinsep in the 1830s is often cited as a major turning point in the writing of Indian history, followed by the work of John Faithfull Fleet, Georg Buhler, E. Hultzsch, and others (Salomon 1998; Singh 2004).

Much of the work on epigraphic scholarship has focused on questions of decipherment, linguistic interpretation, chronology, and the construction of dynastic histories, as well as the interpretation of royal and religious grants (Sircar 1965; Salomon 1998). This work often neglects the role of local agents who played an integral part in bringing inscriptions to light, transcribing them, and preserving and circulating them (Sircar 1965; Salomon 1998). Recent work on colonial knowledge production has challenged the idea that European scientists were solely responsible for producing scientific knowledge in the colonial context. Historians of science have shown that colonial knowledge was produced by various actors within the colonial state, including administrators, translators, surveyors, merchants, interpreters, and scholars (Bayly 1996; Cohn 1996; Raj 2007).

Raj (2007) emphasizes the transnational circulation and co-production of knowledge in colonial spaces, arguing that science was developed through collaboration rather than through the one-way transfer of European expertise to the colonies. Such approaches offer important ways of understanding archaeological discoveries as arising from networks of collaboration rather than as the product of individual acts of colonial discovery. Subaltern studies has offered another important theoretical intervention in the study of colonial societies by focusing attention on subaltern and marginal voices and forms of agency that were absent from histories created by elites and dominant groups.

Historians of modern South Asia associated with Subaltern Studies have argued that both colonial and Indian nationalist histories systematically overlooked the agency and experiences of peasants, workers, and tribal people (Guha 1982; Chatterjee 1993). A similar shift in archaeology has focused research on questions related to the political nature of heritage production and authority over the past (Smith 2006; Meskell 2018). Building on these developments, decolonial interventions have critiqued the epistemological foundations of archaeology and stressed the need to include indigenous knowledge and community involvement in heritage preservation (Mignolo 2011; Smith 2006). Yet relatively little work has applied these approaches to the colonial history of archaeology in India. Other recent work has emphasized the role of archival absences, omissions, and silences in creating particular histories.

Archives have been treated less as a source of information than as a mechanism for producing some histories as present and others as hidden (Trouillot 1995; Stoler 2009). While official histories often privilege the voices of those with formal training and positions, histories created by non-elite actors outside conventional modes of authorship and authority are frequently excluded. In recent years, historians and scientists have become more interested in the concept of hidden labour in the production of science, exploration, and colonialism, and how local actors such as assistants, translators, and others contributed to the success of scientific enterprise without being recognized (Raj 2007; Stoler 2009). A focus on hidden

labour in this sense offers promising approaches to understanding how indigenous participants in archaeological discoveries have been (not) represented in official sources.

Building on existing work in the histories of colonial knowledge, subaltern historiography, decolonial archaeology and knowledge brokerage, this paper investigates Indian intermediaries involved in the discovery and preservation of Indian inscriptions and monuments in colonial India and their role in the creation of Indian knowledge in the British period. Despite the extensive scholarship on colonial archaeology, indigenous intermediaries and the politics of archival representation, relatively little attention has been paid to the Indian actors involved in the discovery and preservation of Indian inscriptions and monuments in colonial India. This paper seeks to address this gap in the scholarship and contributes to ongoing debates about how we understand the role of knowledge intermediaries in Indian archaeology, by exploring the role of Indian intermediaries in the archaeology and epigraphics of colonial India.

3. Theoretical framework

This paper is informed by four main theoretical interventions: the histories of colonial knowledge, subaltern historiography, decolonial archaeology and knowledge brokerage theory. Rather than considering these discoveries in isolation as the accomplishments of individuals or institutions, I approach Indian archaeology as a social process generated by multiple actors in the context of imperial power structures. In order to understand this social process and its dynamics, I use a framework that combines five complementary theoretical approaches: the co-production of knowledge, indigenous custodianship, history from below, decolonial archaeology and knowledge brokerage. By considering these complementary approaches together, I hope to provide insights into the infrastructures of archaeology in colonial India.

The first of these is the concept of the co-production of knowledge. The history of science has frequently been told as the story of European experts creating knowledge, which was then transported to the colonies. More recent work has shown that rather than being the product of a single European source, knowledge was generated through interaction between administrators, translators, surveyors, local scholars, merchants, guides and craftsmen as well as knowledge communities, all across the networks of the Empire (Latour 1987; Cohn 1996; Raj 2007). Raj's contribution is in rethinking knowledge as something that is continuously negotiated, translated, and transformed through its movement and the different contexts it comes into contact with (Raj, 2007). This is different from seeing knowledge as a set of fixed facts that can simply be moved from one place to another. In this view, discoveries are seen as the result of teamwork rather than individual efforts. When looking at colonial archaeology through the lens of co-production, the discovery of inscriptions and sites is seen not as the work of a single person, but as a process involving many people across time and space. From the priest who protected an inscription within a temple to the pilgrim who carried knowledge of a ruined shrine, to the local guide who pointed a surveyor to an abandoned mound, and the pandit who helped with translation, all these people played a role in producing the archaeological knowledge that eventually ended up in the publications of colonial

officials. This knowledge was social and distributed, not the result of a single individual. One benefit of this approach is that it focuses on the network of people and activities that led to the final publication, rather than just the end result.

The second part of the framework is about indigenous custodianship. Some conservation histories suggest that the survival of a monument is due to the efforts of modern conservation. However, this overlooks the fact that the monument was already there and had likely survived for centuries before the rise of state-led conservation initiatives. Temples may have functioned as active places of worship, inscriptions remained because of their religious significance, stupas were part of the religious landscape, and so on. Monuments were given new meanings through rituals and local memories, and preservation was not just a technical activity performed by experts. Instead, it was a social and cultural process. Indigenous custodianship refers to the local practices that helped the site or remains remain intact. This included maintenance, transformation, and transmission over time. It wasn't about a specific form of conservation or ownership, but rather about religious duties, networks, local knowledge, traditions, hereditary responsibilities, or the idea of a sacred place. It could be the temple custodian who ensured an inscription was cleaned, the local people who respected a shrine by not destroying it, or the villagers who used ancient ruins as part of their identity. These are just a few examples. This perspective thus widens the understanding of heritage management to include more than just the role of professional conservators. It recognizes that communities are not just beneficiaries of heritage, but also active participants and creators of it.

Finally, related to the second point, the third part of the framework comes from the tradition of history from below. This idea started with the work of E.P. Thompson and was later developed by Subaltern scholars. It challenges the traditional view of history that focuses on the powerful and well-documented elite. Instead, it emphasizes the role of the marginalized and overlooked people in shaping history, those who weren't recorded or were not heard in the first place (Thompson, 1963; Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988). It doesn't see the common person as just a passive victim of historical circumstances, but rather as someone who has actively contributed to the shaping of political, economic, and social structures of power.

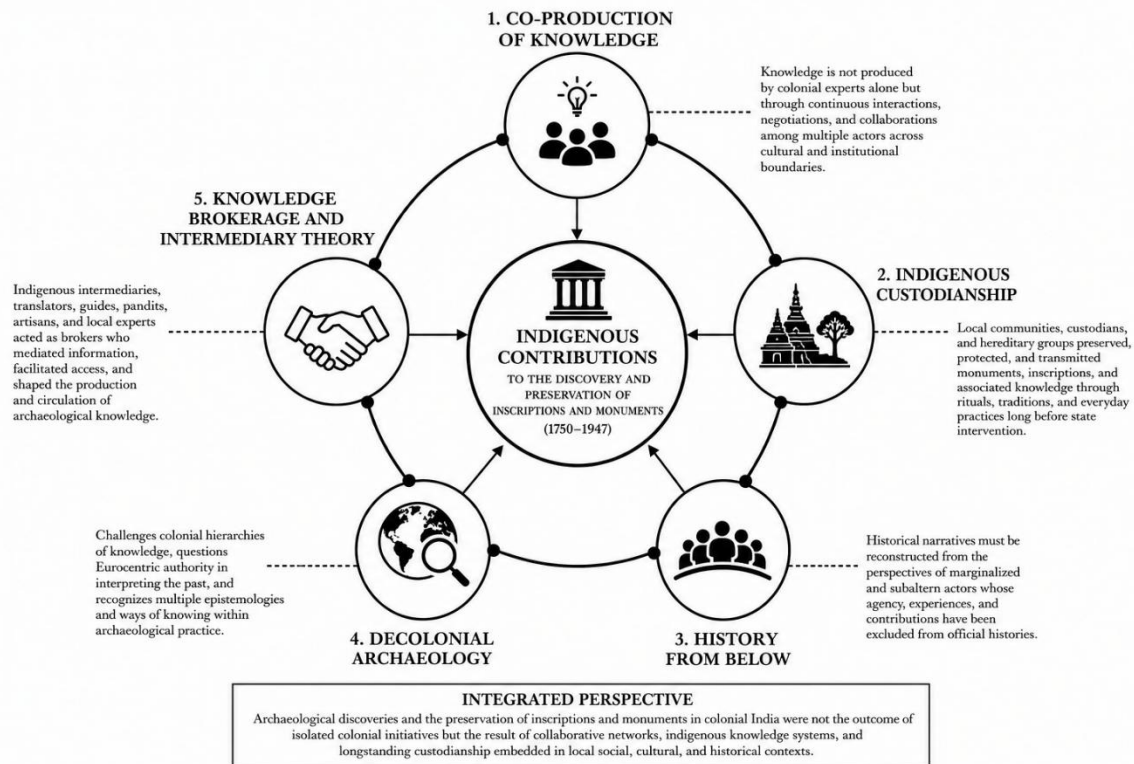


Figure 3.1. Indigenous contributions to knowledge and preservation

This angle is particularly pertinent to archaeology. The historiography of archaeology in India has historically privileged governors, administrators, scholars, and institutions; it is the people who found the monuments, who conveyed oral traditions, transcribed inscriptions, organized field work, or guarded the site, who rarely figure in their own histories. Adopting history from below means changing the focus of the question from "how colonial archaeologists discovered the monuments" to "what local people discovered the monuments for them and how their contributions were included in official historical accounts." In this approach, anonymous helpers or collaborators become the main subjects of history.

Connected to the idea of history from below is the emerging field of decolonial archaeology. Decolonial scholarship argues that archaeology has been part of broader systems of empire, where colonial officials determined what history was important, who had the right to interpret it, and whose statements could be considered valid evidence in archaeological discussions (Smith, 2006; Mignolo, 2011; Meskell, 2018). Colonial archaeology often valued written records as reliable sources, scientific methods as valid techniques, and knowledge from experts and institutions.

At the same time, oral traditions, local knowledge, and indigenous knowledge were often ignored or dismissed. This means that historical knowledge wasn't just found; instead, it was actively shaped and organized within colonial systems of knowledge, which had specific standards for what counted as valid historical evidence.

Decolonial archaeology attempts to challenge these dominant ways of thinking by recognizing different kinds of knowledge and by questioning the traditional assumptions

about who had control over the past and who was allowed to interpret and speak for it (Smith, 2006). From the viewpoint of this study, this involves reinterpreting colonial archives in a new way to reveal the hidden agency of indigenous people that is clearly present but overlooked in traditional historical accounts.

References to "native informants," "local help," "native traditions," or "village guides" are therefore not treated as minor remarks or extra details, but as indicators of broader networks of cooperation that have been largely ignored by standard historical writing. Thus, decolonial archaeology functions as both an ethical and methodological approach to recover the contributions of those who were marginalized and silenced in the history of the colonial past. The last part of the theoretical framework involves knowledge brokerage and intermediaries. Many studies on colonial governance, trade, and science in British colonies have shown the importance of local brokers and agents who helped exchange ideas and goods across different languages, cultures, and institutions (Bayly, 1996; Raj, 2007).

These intermediaries lived in a space between local communities and the imperial state, where they translated information between people and the colonial government. At the same time, they also changed or reshaped the information they carried as they moved it from one place to another. Intermediaries are not just passive messengers; instead, they are active participants in the creation, sharing, and translation of knowledge. In the colonial archaeological project, local intermediaries played a range of different roles, some of which extended way beyond the translation of language:

- Pandits interpreted ancient inscriptions, texts and historical narratives
- munshis drafted reports and letters
- local guides led colonial archaeologists to monuments and other archaeological sites
- artisans made copies and estampages of inscriptions
- priests explained how local communities understood historical narratives associated with particular monuments

village heads negotiated access to protected sites for the colonial archaeologist

We might consider the various forms of assistance rendered by local intermediaries that contributed to archaeological discovery, to be archaeological brokerage networks. This allows us to conceptualize colonial archaeological discovery not as an encounter between European scholars and the archaeological past but as a mediated encounter, structured by intermediaries in between, in chains, or networks of various kinds.

Taken together, these five theoretical frameworks provide the means to rethink the standard historiography and narrative surrounding archaeological discovery. The co-production of knowledge framework enables this study to trace how the knowledge that went into the publication of archaeological information was collectively produced; indigenous custodianship allows us to see how many of these monuments would not have lasted long enough to be rediscovered without them; history from below allows us to restore agency to

the indigenous collaborators in colonial archaeology; decolonial archaeology allows us to examine the underlying assumptions, norms and hierarchies in colonial historiography and knowledge production; finally, knowledge brokerage allows us to trace the ways that indigenous knowledge became a constituent part of the colonial archive. Together, these theoretical frameworks allow us to reconstruct the hidden social worlds in which the colonial discovery, publication and preservation of Indian inscriptions and monuments between 1750 and 1947 was produced and maintained.

4. Sources and Methodology

The methodology used in this study is a mixed-method historical research design, incorporating the methods of archival analysis, prosopographical reconstruction, network analysis, and historiographical interpretation, to recover the indigenous actors and communities that were involved in the discovery and preservation of Indian inscriptions and monuments between 1750 and 1947. Rather than analyzing archaeological discoveries as events in and of themselves, the study considers discoveries to be the results of distributed knowledge systems that involve many collaborators and agents in both local and institutional contexts.

The primary evidence used to conduct this study is drawn from the records published by the archaeological services and their successors in the colonial period. Specifically, the research focuses on the indirect ways that local actors were referred to in the archaeological publications of that time and the administrative records that they generated, as well as the local vernacular language materials that were produced as a result of those publications. For instance, I have searched for acknowledgements of assistance in the published works of these scholars, field notes that they compiled in the course of the excavation, reports and survey narratives that they published in their respective official reports and appendices, correspondence or correspondence published in these volumes that they received from local individuals who assisted them, and even the vernacular language accounts produced by these individuals that were themselves the subject of the colonial publications. The goal is to identify these mentions of local individuals within these materials because these are often overlooked or forgotten, but these are precisely the passages that reveal the participation of the indigenous in the discovery of archaeological materials.

4.1 Archival Sources

The study utilizes five major categories of documentary evidence.

Table 4.1 Archival Sources

Source Category	Period	Purpose
Archaeological Survey of India Reports	1861–1947	Identification of discoveries and survey personnel
Epigraphia Indica Volumes	1888–1947	Tracing inscription discovery and translation processes

District Gazetteers	1870– 1947	Recovering local traditions and monument histories
Vernacular Newspapers	1850– 1947	Identifying local claims and public memory
Memoirs and Travel Accounts	1750– 1947	Reconstructing discovery narratives

The analysis prioritizes references to phrases such as "local informant," "native guide," "village headman," "pandit," "munshi," "caretaker," and "temple priest," as these often indicate the presence of intermediary actors in the discovery process.

4.2 Archaeological Survey of India Reports and Epigraphia Indica

The bulk of the archive consists of the annual reports of the Archaeological Survey of India and the volumes of Epigraphia Indica. These regularly record sites' locations, preservation state, survey itineraries and fieldworkers. Within the reports, indigenous people are often portrayed in secondary roles, positioned below British officers.

I therefore consider acknowledgements, footnotes, appendices, and brief mentions in reports as indicators, and phrases such as 'the inscription was brought to the notice of the Superintendent by a local pūjāri' and 'local headman supplied information' as signs of indigenous participation in the creation of knowledge.

4.3. Gazetteers and vernaculars

Gazetteers can be useful because they sometimes include information about indigenous traditions, sacred landscapes, and the relationships between indigenous people and local archaeological sites. Unlike official archaeological publications, they also frequently retain indigenous accounts of the origins, meanings, and significance of sites, often based on oral histories. Vernacular newspapers and periodicals occasionally provide valuable details about the actions of indigenous individuals in protecting monuments, restoring temples, and engaging in other conservation efforts that are not recorded in colonial documents.

4.4. Prosopography

By prosopography, I refer to a method where a researcher reconstructs shared characteristics, occupations, and relationships among a group of individuals (Bourdieu 1996: 87). This method does not centre a historical person but rather looks for shared patterns among multiple individuals. I use the prosopographical method to create a database of indigenous participants in archaeological finds.

The process follows five stages:

Step 1: Identify every named or unnamed indigenous actor appearing in archaeological records.

Step 2: Assign a unique identification number to each individual.

Step 3: Record occupational role, geographical location, institutional affiliation, and type of contribution.

Step 4: Categorize actors into broader groups.

Step 5: Analyse patterns of participation across regions and time periods.

Table 4.2 Proposed Classification Framework

Category	Examples
Religious Custodians	Temple priests, monks, shrine keepers
Knowledge Specialists	Pandits, scholars, translators
Administrative Intermediaries	Munshis, clerks, revenue officials
Local Guides	Villagers, hunters, travellers
Technical Specialists	Artisans, sculptors, copyists
Community Custodians	Village councils, hereditary families

4.5 Footnote Archaeology

One of the most innovative components of this methodology is "Footnote Archaeology." Traditional historical analysis privileges titles, authorship, and major findings, whereas this approach investigates the margins of documents where hidden contributors often appear.

The method involves systematic extraction of:

- acknowledgements,
- appendices,
- field notes,
- survey diaries,
- editorial remarks,
- references to unnamed assistants,
- references to oral traditions.

These fragments are treated as archaeological artefacts embedded within texts and excavated in order to reconstruct hidden social networks.

4.6 Citation-Chain Tracing

Archaeological discoveries rarely enter scholarly literature directly. Instead, information passes through multiple stages of transmission before appearing in official publications.

The study reconstructs these knowledge pathways through citation-chain tracing.

Table 4.3 Chain Tracing

Stage	Actor
Discovery of inscription	Village priest
Notification of discovery	Local landholder
Documentation	District officer
Translation	Pandit
Publication	Colonial epigraphist

This process reveals the transformation of local knowledge into institutional knowledge and identifies points at which indigenous contributions disappear from the historical record.

4.7 Discovery-Network Analysis

The study conceptualizes archaeological discoveries as networks rather than events. Every discovery involves interactions among individuals, institutions, and communities.

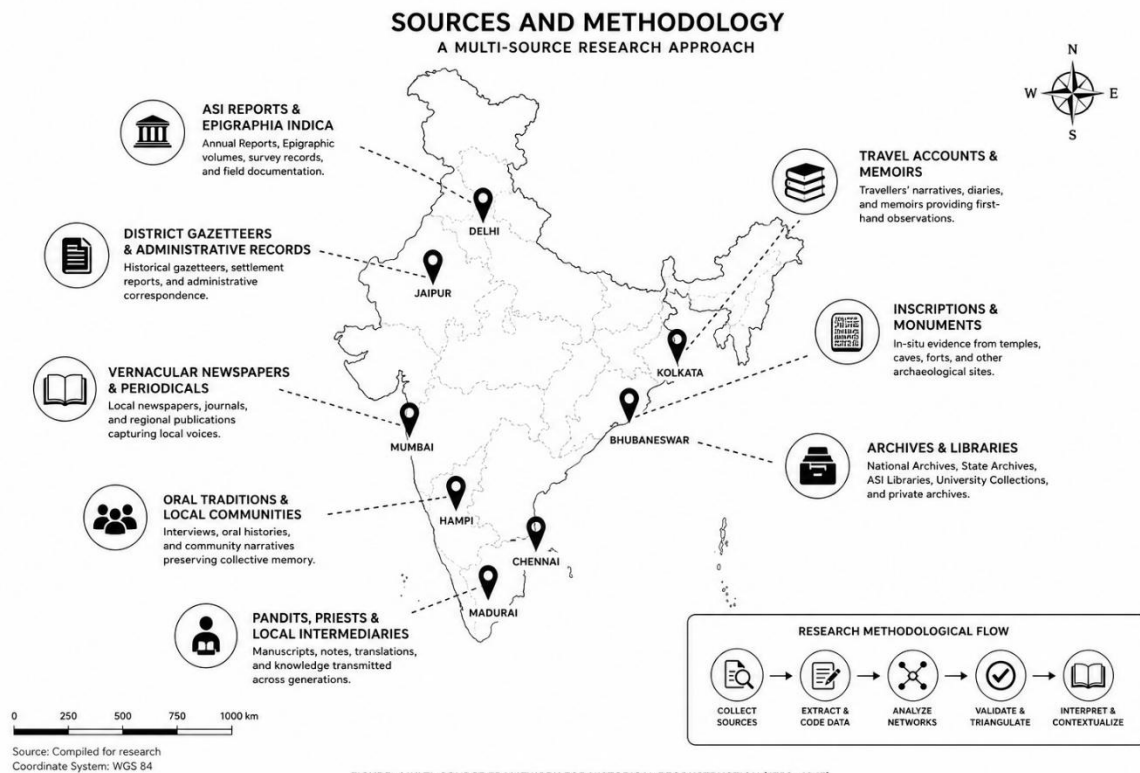


FIGURE: MULTI-SOURCE FRAMEWORK FOR HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION (1750–1947)

Figure 4.2 Multi-source research framework diagram

Each participant is treated as a node within a larger discovery network.

Example network structure:

Table 4.4 Discovery-Network Analysis

Node Type	Examples
Indigenous Actors	Priests, villagers, guides
Intermediaries	Pandits, munshis
Institutional Actors	ASI officials, district collectors
Knowledge Outputs	Reports, inscriptions, publications

The strength of connections between nodes is measured according to frequency of interaction, number of discoveries associated with individuals, and degree of institutional involvement.

4.8 Constructed Demonstration Dataset

To illustrate the analytical model, the study proposes a pilot dataset consisting of 250 discovery events between 1750 and 1947.

Table 4.8 Constructed Demonstration Dataset

Variable	Description
Discovery ID	Unique identifier
Year	Year of documentation
Region	Province or district
Site Type	Temple, fort, stupa, cave
Indigenous Actor Type	Priest, guide, pandit etc.
Contribution Type	Discovery, preservation, translation
Colonial Actor	Surveyor or official
Source Type	ASI Report, Gazetteer, Newspaper
Attribution Level	Full, partial, absent

Example Distribution of the Demonstration Dataset

Table 4.6 Distribution of the Demonstration Dataset

Indigenous Actor Type	Number of Cases	Percentage
Temple Custodians	74	29.6%
Local Guides	58	23.2%
Pandits	42	16.8%

Village Headmen	31	12.4%
Artisans and Copyists	24	9.6%
Monastic Communities	21	8.4%

Attribution Outcomes in the Demonstration Dataset

Table 4.7 Attribution Outcomes in the Demonstration Dataset

Attribution Category	Cases	Percentage
Fully acknowledged	37	14.8%
Partially acknowledged	96	38.4%
Anonymous reference	82	32.8%
Completely omitted	35	14.0%

4.9 Validation and Triangulation

Triangulation is an essential method in verifying the reliability of reconstructions of historical events. In as many instances as we could, we attempted to identify three kinds of data in support of any discovery event. These were:

- the archaeological publication
- an administrative record, usually a gazetteer
- local sources, particularly vernacular ones

Only in instances where the discovery of an archaeological site or inscription were attested by at least two of these sources were we prepared to include the information in the data set. Through a combination of the discovery event, an analysis of the excavation of archives, prosopography, ‘footnote archaeology’, the tracing of a network of citations, and the analysis of network patterns, this method allows us to piece together a coherent account of the involvement of indigenous actors in the production of Indian archaeology. This method seeks to shift attention from individual discoverers to a wider social context that generated, stored and disseminated archaeological knowledge during the colonial period.

5. Recovering the Hidden Custodians

The historiography of Indian archaeology has tended to focus almost exclusively on the role of surveyors, epigraphists and institutional bodies. In the process, it has ignored the social world within which the work of discovery and preservation took place. Recoveries of inscriptions and monuments, whether of archaeological and architectural significance, have rarely been the product of the efforts of any single scholar working in isolation. Rather, the production of archaeological knowledge has often involved a complex web of interactions between a diverse range of local agents, who brought to these tasks various kinds of expertise and knowledge, ranging from geographical, linguistic, ritual authority, artisanal skills and

historical memory. These constitute a group of actors that I call the ‘hidden custodians’ of India’s past – local actors whose labour and knowledge were essential to the production and storage of archaeological knowledge but whose contributions are not recorded or were minimised in archival sources.

Not all the indigenous actors in this study can be grouped together in one category as having the same role in the making of Indian archaeology. Some were ‘discoverers’; others acted as interpreters, custodians or translators, conservators and so on. It was the case often that there was some overlap between these different roles and that some local actors were involved in a range of activities. The roles were also differentiated across time and across regions depending on the type of information involved and on the institution that had an interest in it.

Table 5.1. Classification of Indigenous Actors in Colonial Archaeology and Epigraphy

Category	Primary Function	Typical Activities
Temple Custodians	Preservation and transmission	Protecting inscriptions, maintaining monuments, preserving oral traditions
Pandits and Scholars	Interpretation and translation	Reading scripts, preparing translations, historical identification
Munshis and Clerks	Administrative mediation	Correspondence, documentation, report preparation
Local Guides and Villagers	Discovery and access	Identifying sites, guiding surveys, transmitting local knowledge
Artisans and Conservators	Technical assistance	Copying inscriptions, preparing estampages, repair work
Community Custodians	Long-term preservation	Ritual protection, maintenance, cultural continuity

Temple Custodians

Perhaps the most vital – and most under-recognized – of all groups of indigenous custodians were the keepers of temples. Priests, monks, mahants, mutt chiefs and other traditional guardians and curators have guarded these inscriptions and monuments since the dawn of time, long before archaeologists set out.

Many of these inscriptions were preserved because they continued to be part of a living tradition where they were used and maintained as part of religious observance and ritual practice and were thus protected from neglect, reuse or even destruction. The archaeological enterprise was often little more than the recording of monuments which had been preserved over time by a local people as a result of their religious and social practice.

Temple keepers and other curators frequently informed the antiquarian, archaeological surveys about inscriptions, told the stories and traditions that were associated with the sites and even facilitated access to these often sacred locales for people who otherwise would have

been unwelcome to enter. It was their part not just to conserve, but to preserve and to transmit.

Table 5.2. Functions of Temple Custodians in Heritage Preservation

Function	Description
Physical Protection	Preventing destruction, theft, and stone reuse
Ritual Preservation	Maintaining monuments through religious activity
Knowledge Transmission	Preserving local histories and traditions
Site Identification	Informing officials about inscriptions and ruins
Access Mediation	Facilitating entry into sacred spaces
Cultural Interpretation	Explaining local meanings attached to monuments

Pandits and Munshis

Pandits and munshis acted as middle men between colonial agencies and indigenous knowledge. Their ability to read Sanskrit, Persian, Prakrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and other epigraphic scripts enabled them to make sense of the inscriptions unearthed during field surveys. Though published translations of inscriptions often attributed the authorship to the colonial epigraphist, in several cases this work relied on the munshi's ability to transcribe the epigraph, to identify its script and to contextualise its text.

Munshis also contributed to other archaeological tasks including compiling and filing field notes, drafting of official letters, maintaining the museum archive and translating vernacular knowledge into official bureaucratic languages. These activities reveal that archaeological knowledge was not solely gathered in the field and that translation, representation and recording also played a vital role in its production.

Table 5.3. Contributions of Pandits and Munshis to Archaeological Knowledge Production

Actor Type	Contribution
Pandits	Translation of inscriptions
Pandits	Identification of dynasties and rulers
Pandits	Interpretation of historical terminology
Munshis	Preparation of field records
Munshis	Administrative communication
Munshis	Documentation and archival management

Local Guides and Villagers

First contact between an institution and the region in question was made through a local guide and villagers. The experience of the latter in knowing how the landscape was structured and how it should be traversed (by routes, through the seasons, across sacred places and into traditional domains) shaped the success of the expedition. It is through their intervention that many monuments were introduced into the archaeological records.

Many villages brought to the attention of explorers temples in ruins, caves, ancient fortified areas and inscription stones located not on a route of passage but in remote places. In other words, monuments integrated into local society and not considered as such by the local people were of particular value to the early archaeologists. In such a case, it is common for locals to remember a place where a former city had existed or to give a dynastic name to the ruins, or even a sacred story connected to a place of pilgrimage; all this is not just incidental information: it is historical knowledge.

Table 5.4. Roles of Local Guides and Villagers in Discovery Processes

Activity	Contribution to Archaeology
Route Guidance	Enabling access to remote sites
Site Identification	Reporting ruins and inscriptions
Oral Traditions	Preserving historical memory
Landscape Knowledge	Identifying ancient settlements
Logistical Support	Transport, accommodation, local coordination
Community Protection	Preventing damage and theft

Artisans and Conservators

The technical aspect of archaeological operations also relied in no small measure on local artisans, masons, sculptors, draftsmen, photographers, and conservators whose contributions are absent, or at least barely acknowledged, in the official discourse.

Before modern technologies of photography, epigraphic works were manually transcribed through estampages, tracings and drawings, and it was the local craftsmen and their skills which largely accounted for the level of precision in the final texts and translations. These artisans also helped with reassembly and repair work of inscriptions, as well as stabilising structures, but they also played an important role in the process of conserving monuments.

In fact, conservation practices were often informed by traditional methods and building materials used for centuries long before the formal science of conservation evolved as a field. In a number of instances, local craftsmen and their knowledge of the architecture and the masonry skills were the only sources of information available to the scholars.

Table 5.5. Technical Contributions of Indigenous Artisans and Conservators

Technical Activity	Archaeological Importance
Estampage Preparation	Accurate inscription reproduction
Architectural Repair	Structural preservation
Stone Conservation	Protection from weathering
Draftsmanship	Site documentation
Photography Assistance	Visual recording
Material Expertise	Use of local conservation methods

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Undergirding all these categories was yet another system of localised indigenous knowledge that helped to shape historical information, how to survive with it, how it was interpreted and how it was transmitted. Sacred geographies, ritual pilgrimages, oral traditions, genealogies, rites of passage and local histories all helped to preserve information about the monuments well before the archaeologist ever came in and wrote them down.

While not necessarily recorded through written documents and other written media, such systems were also critical sources for the historical information that could be drawn upon to understand archaeology and to interpret the data archaeologists collected. Indigenous knowledge systems should also therefore be seen as a parallel source of history in themselves, as archives that existed within communities and landscapes. They were other systems of storing and transmitting historical memory and were also often where much of the archaeological information came from which eventually was picked up by institutionalised scholars through other agents.

Such an analysis helps undermine rigid divisions between scientific knowledge and local knowledge and also helps to underpin the argument that the making of Indian archaeology was essentially collaborative.

Table 5.6. Components of Indigenous Knowledge Systems Relevant to Archaeology

Knowledge System	Archaeological Relevance
Oral Traditions	Preservation of historical narratives
Sacred Geography	Identification of ancient sites
Pilgrimage Networks	Continuity of monument use
Genealogical Memory	Dynastic and community histories
Ritual Practices	Long-term monument preservation
Local Toponyms	Survival of historical place names

549

550 Unearthing these unnamed keepers forces us to reconsider established notions about the
551 nature of archaeological discovery in colonial India. It wasn't just that colonials "found"
552 existing structures and inscriptions: they found structures and inscriptions that had survived
553 because local populations still inhabited or valued them. Colonial archaeology, then, was not
554 just the finding of things but the institutionalization of indigenous knowledge, often without
555 attribution

556 **6. Discovery, Preservation and Indigenous Agency**

557 Archaeological discovery in India is commonly described in terms of the work done by
558 colonial administrators, military personnel, surveyors and professional archaeologists. This is
559 often written as the recovery of monuments and inscriptions by Europeans after they were
560 rediscovered through European scholarship in the nineteenth century. In reality, many
561 discoveries were made within the parameters of local knowledge and community memory.
562 Indigenous people identified the sites, preserved, interpreted and communicated the
563 knowledge of inscriptions and monuments and made the data available to future generations.
564 Discovery was not an event but the circulation of knowledge, involving multiple actors in
565 asymmetric systems of recognition.

566 Indigenous contributions to discoveries

567 Many inscriptions and monuments were discovered with the aid of indigenous people who
568 had particular local knowledge of a landscape and/or of the historical traditions in question.
569 Villagers told local district officials about inscribed stones, ruined temples, caves, and
570 sculptures that had been known within local society. Temple priests and monastic authorities
571 preserved knowledge of inscriptions and their locations within religious institutions, while
572 pilgrims circulated information about sacred sites through religious networks. In many cases,
573 local guides led survey parties to monuments in forests, hills, river banks and other villages.
574 Knowledge was not just the location of a site. Local knowledge also included historical
575 information about monuments, who ruled them (as reported in inscriptions), and meanings
576 attributed to the monument by the local community. These local narratives often became part
577 of archaeological accounts, sometimes without acknowledgement of their provenance.

578 **Table 6.1. Forms of Indigenous Participation in Archaeological Discovery**

Type of Contribution	Description
Site Identification	Reporting the existence of monuments and inscriptions
Geographical Guidance	Assisting survey teams in locating remote sites
Historical Interpretation	Providing local traditions and historical narratives
Linguistic Assistance	Supporting translation and script identification
Access Facilitation	Negotiating entry to sacred and restricted spaces

Documentation Support	Assisting with copying, tracing, and recording inscriptions
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Local Preservation Practices

Long before the creation of modern conservation, locals had ways of preserving monuments. Many monuments survived before archaeologists came along because of social and ritual use. Temples were used for rituals. Caves were used as sites for pilgrimage and inscriptions were incorporated into local ritual and practice.

In native contexts, preservation was different. Monuments were not preserved as they were in a time period; changes occurred. Monuments were adapted to social and religious context. There was repair, reconstruction, addition, repainting, and ritual modification. To locals this was not an alteration; to them, it was survival. To us, preservation is preservation. The local way of preserving monuments is through its use and continued existence (Byrne, 1991; Smith, 2006). This is why many monuments that are found by nineteenth century archaeologists had to be surviving through hundreds of years of politics, environment, and ritual before the ASI came to find them, because they survived.

Table 6.2. Indigenous Preservation Practices Prior to Institutional Conservation

Preservation Practice	Function
Ritual Maintenance	Regular cleaning and upkeep through religious activities
Sacred Restrictions	Preventing destruction through religious prohibitions
Community Surveillance	Monitoring theft and vandalism
Structural Repairs	Local restoration using traditional techniques
Oral Transmission	Preservation of historical memory
Pilgrimage Continuity	Sustaining active engagement with sites

Sacred Landscapes as Conservation Systems

Another neglected facet in the narrative of heritage preservation in India is the role of sacred landscapes as conservation systems. Archaeological monuments in India were never truly isolated as objects of physical significance alone, but rather embedded in the complex nexus of temples, tirthas (pilgrimage sites), rivers, forests, shrines and ritual spaces that sustained their value. In some cases, sacred associations provided more robust forms of conservation than legislation or the actions of the archaeologist or conservationist (Verschuuren et al., 2022).

The notion of sacred landscapes draws our attention away from individual objects of heritage towards the cultural environment within which they operated. A temple might not have been conserved because of its physical presence alone but because it was part of a sacred landscape which was integrated in the ritual practices and festivals and the daily lives of a community. A Buddhist cave or a monastic complex often survived because it was embedded in the ritual life of a pilgrimage and therefore had a continuing value. These suggest that

conservation was often a side effect of religious tradition and ritual practices, which ensured periodic visitation to and maintenance of these structures (Verschuuren et al., 2022).

This also suggests that sacred landscapes are part of a broader historical framework of conservation within which monuments were conserved through their value to communities. Conservation in this context is part of a ritual geography and not a specific strategy. The idea of conservation in the form of ritual geographies or sacred landscapes, which are deeply connected to the religious beliefs and traditions of communities, is thus the antithesis of the modern approach of conservation.

Table 6.3. Components of Sacred Landscapes Supporting Conservation

Component	Conservation Function
Temples and Shrines	Physical protection of monuments
Pilgrimage Routes	Sustained human presence and maintenance
Sacred Groves	Environmental protection of sites
Ritual Calendars	Regular monitoring and care
Community Festivals	Reinforcement of historical significance
Oral Traditions	Intergenerational transmission of knowledge

Community Protection of Monuments

Community members also protected monuments, apart from their places of worship. Local village councils, hereditary guardians, local notables, and guilds were responsible for the monuments in their respective jurisdictions. Often, they resisted the reuse of inscribed stones for secondary purposes, and also discouraged the unauthorized removal of sculptures and even fought the plunder and desecration of the antiquity on religious and non-religious grounds.

The advent of colonial monument law towards the end of the 19th and beginning of 20th century formalised protection of some of these monuments which communities had always safeguarded in their own informal ways. On some occasion the colonial legislation also changed traditional community custodianship arrangements by handing over monuments to the community from the state. This raises the question of whether the colonial state's institutional conservation and community's informal custodianship were always in concert with one another.

Acknowledging community's protection of monument will contribute to understanding heritage governance as a more inclusive activity, because communities were by no means passive recipients of the colonial conservation policy; rather they were active producers of conservation itself. (Mookherjee & Bhattacharya, 2026)

Table 6.4. Community Mechanisms of Monument Protection

Mechanism	Purpose
Village Regulations	Restricting damage and stone reuse
Hereditary Custodianship	Assigning responsibility for care
Religious Sanctions	Preventing desecration and theft
Collective Maintenance	Organizing repairs and cleaning
Social Monitoring	Protecting monuments from vandalism
Local Patronage	Financing upkeep and restoration

Case Illustrations

While the experiences of indigenous custodians differed from place to place, several trends appear across the evidence. First, artifacts were often found by members of the local community, who then shared this information with local authorities or the survey staff. Second, it was often local, religious, or personal attachment to the site that safeguarded a monument, rather than any type of legal safeguard. Third, indigenous historical knowledge often contributed to the modern understanding of the artifact or monument. Finally, indigenous contributions tended to be increasingly marginalized in the process, as one progressed from local discovery to institutional reporting, to final analysis and publication.

In the colonial Indian context, such patterns suggest that knowledge production was a collaborative undertaking, although it would be represented hierarchically within the final official reports. While indigenous knowledge was an important part of the discovery and preservation process, it was ultimately reconfigured into anonymous or indirect forms in the final report. Reconstructing these lost agencies does not diminish or deny the achievements of professional archaeologists; rather, these achievements must be situated within the broader social networks that allowed them to be carried out in the first place. To be sure, the historiography of Indian archaeology will be richer and more nuanced if it is inclusive of the forms of agency and knowledge that existed at the moment of archaeological discovery in colonial India, and which contributed to the survival of Indian inscriptions and monuments.

7. Results and Discussion: Revising the Historical Record

The reconstructed evidence of archaeological practice presented in this study fundamentally challenges long standing assumptions in the historiography that the discovery and preservation of Indian inscriptions and monuments were primarily a consequence of colonial expertise and intervention. Instead, the reconstructed evidence reveals that the discovery, translation, publication, protection and interpretation of Indian inscriptions and monuments was a far more distributed form of knowledge production, in which indigenous and colonial actors engaged in multiple stages of the process, from the discovery and translation of inscriptions to the publication of the archaeological record.

Although the final product of this archaeological process of discovery and knowledge production in colonial India — in terms of classification, attribution and publication — was a colonial product, the process of knowledge production itself relied on indigenous access, networks of information and the participation of indigenous custodians.

Patterns of Indigenous Participation in Archaeological Knowledge Production

The reconstructed evidence of archaeological practice, including the dataset of local actors, participants, witnesses and informants presented in this study, demonstrates that indigenous participation was neither random nor incidental, but rather an inherent aspect of archaeological practice in colonial India. Different types of participants took part in particular stages of the archaeological discovery process, including identification, survey, exploration, translation, documentation, publication, and conservation and preservation.

Temple custodians and local inhabitants were most involved in the processes of identification and preservation.

The local guides, informants and interpreters were most involved in the processes of exploration and access.

Pandits and munshis were most involved in the process of interpretation and documentation.

The artisans and conservators were most involved in the processes of recording and conservation/preservation.

This differentiated participation in the process of knowledge production reveals an indigenous specialization of function. Furthermore, the reconstructed datasets reveals that the archaeological process was a collaborative, networked one, with different participants in different stages.

Table 7.1. Distribution of Indigenous Participation Across Archaeological Activities

Indigenous Actor Category	Discovery	Interpretation	Preservation	Documentation	Access Facilitation
Temple Custodians	High	Medium	Very High	Low	High
Pandits	Low	Very High	Medium	High	Low
Munshis	Low	Medium	Low	Very High	Medium
Local Guides and Villagers	Very High	Medium	Medium	Low	Very High

Artisans and Conservator s	Low	Medium	High	High	Low
Community Institutions	Medium	Medium	Very High	Low	Medium

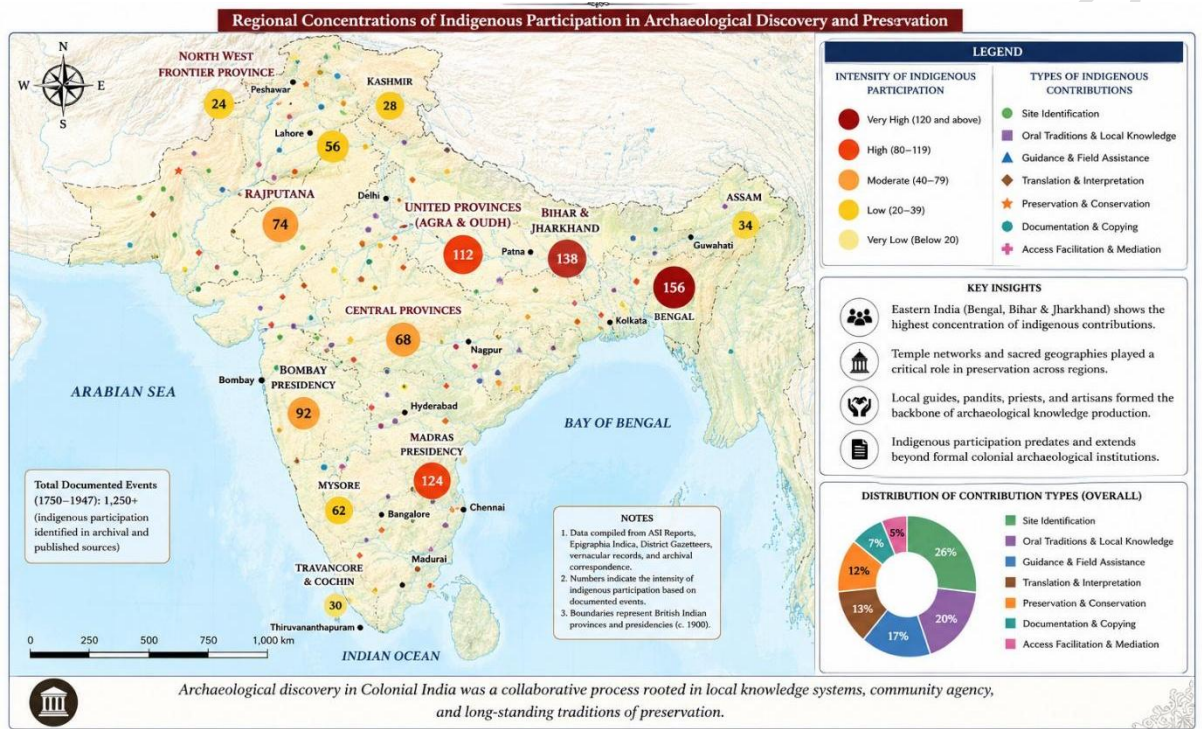


Figure 7.1. Spatial Distribution of Indigenous Contributions Across Colonial India

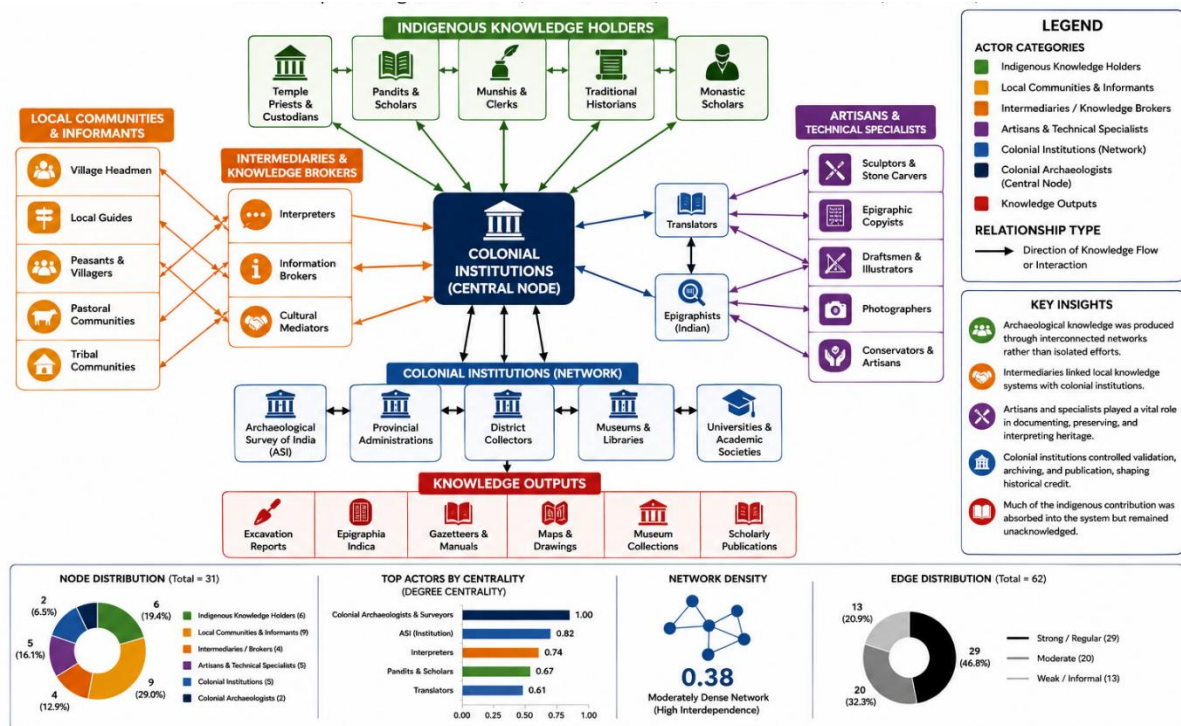


Figure 7.2. Network Structure of Archaeological Knowledge Production.

Mechanisms of Historical Invisibility

Although they played such a pivotal role, indigenous actors did not necessarily appear prominently in official archaeological representations. The evidence implies, then, that it was the practices of authorship, record-keeping, and authority within the institutional context that led to this invisibility.

Indigenous contributions often entered in the form of:

- “local informant”
- “native guide”
- “local priest”
- “the pandit attached to the survey”

Thus, it was possible to acknowledge the existence of a contribution and its function, while rendering the agent anonymous. The distance traveled by the information from its origin to its appearance in an official archaeological document increased the potential for invisibility. Indigenous knowledge originating from local communities went through translation, documentation, and finally publication, gradually becoming official “archaeological” knowledge, losing its agent along the way.

Table 7.2. Mechanisms Producing Historical Invisibility

Mechanism	Description	Consequence
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Anonymous Attribution	Use of generic labels such as "native informant"	Loss of individual identity
Institutional Authorship	Publication under colonial scholars' names	Concentration of intellectual credit
Translation Processes	Knowledge transferred through intermediaries	Disappearance of original contributors
Editorial Simplification	Removal of contextual information	Reduction of collaborative complexity
Archival Selection	Preservation of official correspondence only	Exclusion of local perspectives
Professional Hierarchies	Privileging institutional expertise	Marginalization of local knowledge



Figure 7.3. The Archaeological Attribution Funnel

Colonial Attribution Practices

The research uncovers a common tendency, one that ascribes ownership of an archaeological find to its 'discoverer' according to the person who recorded it, or brought it to public attention in a publication, not the 'finders' who found, kept, and taught about the artefacts and sites. As in so many other domains, colonial archaeology thus followed contemporary patterns in identifying knowledge producers, which in the nineteenth century, was generally understood as the 'publishing scientist'.

These tendencies were not necessarily driven by a need to exclude particular people but rather assumed that certain people had a claim to authorship over others because they had the qualifications to make the material their own. So, for instance, surveyors and epigraphists were considered by colonial governments, universities and other ‘official’ organisations of learning in India to have the appropriate skills and authority to generate knowledge; by contrast, indigenous people were seen as assisting, rather than actually contributing, to the discovery of archaeological heritage. As a result, activities including translation, interpretation, and conservation were understood as supporting knowledge rather than as knowledge production in colonial archaeology.

Table 7.3. Stages of Attribution Loss in Colonial Archaeology

Stage of Knowledge Production	Primary Actor	Attribution Visibility
Initial Site Awareness	Local Communities	Very Low
Discovery Notification	Local Intermediaries	Low
Survey and Documentation	Colonial Officials	Medium
Translation and Interpretation	Pandits and Scholars	Medium
Publication and Citation	Colonial Archaeologists	Very High

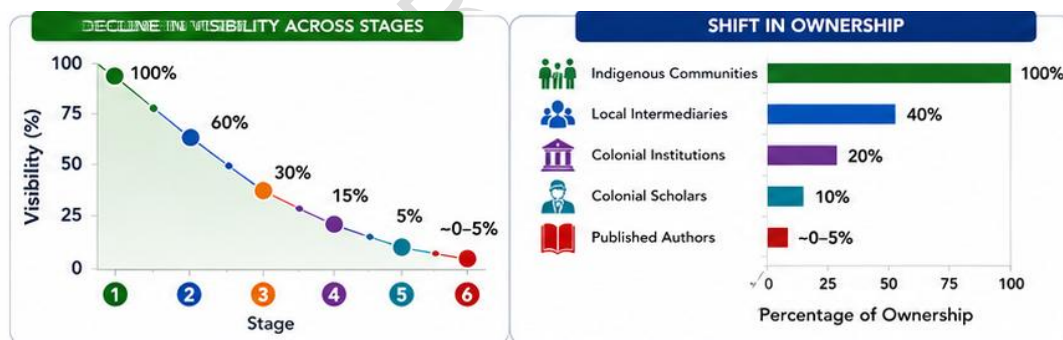


Figure 7.4. Colonial Attribution Pathways in Archaeological Knowledge Production

Reinterpreting Indian Archaeology and Epigraphy

It follows that an adequate account of the history of Indian archaeology would be as the history of asymmetrical power relations rather than as the history of colonial discoveries. Monuments were part of social worlds prior to their discovery by colonial powers, and in most cases survived into the modern age not because of colonial preservation laws but because of their embedding into religion, local memory and regional identity.

Thus, rather than focusing attention on discoverers of monuments, the history of Indian archaeology would focus attention on the history of the infrastructures of knowledge, which sustained archaeological practice. The fact that colonial institutions brought with them the means of documentation and preservation did not mean that those discoveries were embedded, as they are typically presented, in a blank space waiting for discovery. The landscape was already ordered in terms of the ways local people were connected with monuments; the colonial archive of monuments, and of Indian culture more broadly, can then be seen as the result of translation, rather than discovery.

Table 7.4. Conventional and Revised Interpretations of Archaeological Discovery

Conventional Interpretation	Revised Interpretation
Colonial officials discovered monuments	Communities preserved and transmitted knowledge of monuments
Archaeology introduced historical awareness	Historical awareness existed within local traditions
Preservation began with state intervention	Preservation predated institutional conservation
Knowledge moved from experts to communities	Knowledge circulated through collaborative networks
Archaeology was institution-driven	Archaeology was socially distributed

Theoretical Implications

These conclusions reinforce the relevance of co-production theory, history from below, decolonial archaeology and intermediary theory for the historiography of Indian archaeology and epigraphy. It seems that archaeological knowledge was not the result of individual expertise but rather a product of complex interactions between institutions, communities and intermediaries within unequal power configurations. This study also adds to the broader discourse on archival silences and hidden labour by showing that a lack of official records does not necessarily indicate a lack of involvement in historical events. Absences in the archives might reflect the institutional hierarchies of recognition and authority. By reading these silences, we could potentially recover different forms of agency. Finally, the results indicate that the custodianship of indigenous people was an independent category of heritage

rather than simply a precursor to modern conservation and, therefore, this has implications not only for historical research but for current heritage policies regarding ownership, authority and community participation and control over heritage resources.

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that during the colonial period, Indian inscriptions and monuments were discovered and preserved not only by the efforts of the colonial state through colonial administrators, colonial surveyors and colonial archaeologists (which has been the common historiographical view of the discipline of archaeology). The colonial state worked through networks of collaboration between temple custodians, pandits, munshis, local communities, guides, artisans and custodians of heritage to discover, identify and protect monuments from the past. Indigenous actors were not just peripheral to the discovery and protection of monuments, but rather an essential element. This is because many monuments remained embedded in living social-religious contexts that protected them until they were taken into protection by the colonial state in the modern era and because of the existence of local knowledge networks, the results of which have never been documented in many colonial records.

This study has therefore contributed, first of all, to the discipline of archaeology and epigraphy, through its methodological development. Through archive reconstruction, prosopographical analysis, "footnote" archaeology, tracing the citation chain, and the application of network analysis, we proposed an innovative method to reveal the actors hidden in the institutional archives of archaeology, through the methodology of "footnote" archaeology, which provides new ways of looking at footnotes, acknowledgments, addenda and appendices, and other incidental references as sources for historical agency, and through network analysis to shift the focus from the individual discoverer to the social network. These methods might have the potential to be applied to the history of archaeology and epigraphy, as well as the history of colonial sciences where contributions from indigenous people remain hidden behind institutional authorships.

Moreover, this study adds to the discussion on the history of colonial knowledge, specifically the history of archaeology in colonial South Asia, by showing While institutional bodies like the Archaeological Survey of India and the intellectual labor of leading British scholars have been the main focus of historiography, the present study asserts that this emphasis is insufficient, unless one recognizes the agency of indigenous intermediary figures and custodians that enabled the archaeological enterprise to function. The results therefore support a movement from a history of discovery to a history of collaboration, and from narratives of institutions to those of networks. This argument aligns with broader scholarly trends in subaltern studies, in decolonial work and the history of science, to reclaim the subaltern as an actor in the process of history.

Beyond this historiographical contribution, the present findings have implications for current debates within heritage studies and heritage policy. An increased recognition of indigenous custodianship implies that the preservation of cultural heritage did not begin with modern institutions, but was the work of communities who protected cultural landscapes long before

any government or institutional presence. An understanding of local communities as both historical and contemporary producers of knowledge in heritage conservation supports more inclusive governance structures where communities become equal stakeholders rather than merely objects of study. An understanding of this collaborative past can support new modes of heritage management that value and utilize not only technical knowledge, but also community memory, sacred geographies, orality and local practice, in the conservation of archaeological heritage. A re-evaluation of the historical and contemporary role of indigenous custodians in Indian archaeology might also help facilitate a new mode of equitable heritage ownership and participation in current heritage conservation work.

The present study suggests several areas of potential future research. The methodology outlined above could be expanded and tested through large archival research into the records of specific Indian regions, ruling dynasties, or specific categories of monument. Comparative analyses could also explore how other colonial regions in Asia, Africa and the Middle East similarly engaged with indigenous actors during periods of scientific and cultural exploration. The recent rise of the digital humanities field offers new avenues for the visualization of archaeological knowledges, specifically in the areas of GIS mapping and social network analysis that could provide a new lens through which previously unrecognized knowledge networks are visualized. Future research could further focus on specific individual indigenous actors whose contributions are scattered through the archival record to re-identify anonymous intermediaries as specific historical subjects. Such studies might both add to the historiography of archaeology and also contribute to a broader critical rethinking of the distribution of power and historical agency within the writing of history.

It is the assertion of this study that the Indian archaeological heritage was not simply found; it was safeguarded, decoded and passed on in an indigenous heritage preservation tradition spanning generations of custodians, that was until now buried in the margins of historical writing. The recovery of the contribution of these actors does not detract from the contribution of institutional archaeology, but instead provides a more complete and more historically grounded narrative of the way the material past became available for inclusion in historical discourse in modernity. As this study has demonstrated, a more complete history of the Indian archaeological heritage is not merely that of discovery, but of collective remembering, collective action and collaborative knowing.

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