

REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR- 58278

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

Recommendation:

Accept after minor revision

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		✓		
Techn. Quality			✓	
Clarity			✓	
Significance	✓			

Reviewer's ID: Abdul Haseeb Mir

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The manuscript under review offers a compelling and timely intervention into the historiography of South Asian archaeology and epigraphy between 1750 and 1947. Historically, the narrative of archaeological discovery in colonial India has been dominated by a Eurocentric, top-down perspective that privileges the agency of the colonial state and individual European antiquarians, administrators, and surveyors. This paper fundamentally challenges that paradigm by introducing an interdisciplinary framework rooted in the co-production of knowledge, subaltern historiography, and decolonial archaeology. By focusing on what the author aptly terms "hidden custodians"—including temple priests, vernacular pandits, munshis, local guides, and traditional artisans—the study meticulously attempts to recover the marginalized indigenous agency that underpinned the institutionalization of archaeological knowledge in India.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its conceptualization of archaeological discovery not as a series of unilateral European triumphs, but as the result of complex, asymmetrical collaborative networks. The manuscript effectively argues that the survival and documentation of India's monumental heritage were heavily reliant on pre-existing indigenous structures of stewardship, sacred geographies, and local expertise. The introduction of specific methodological tools, such as "footnote archaeology," citation-chain tracing, and prosopography, provides a robust toolkit for extracting these obscured figures from the margins of colonial archives and official reports. Furthermore, the conceptual model of the archaeological attribution funnel illustrates the systematic institutional mechanisms through which local knowledge was filtered, aggregated, and ultimately stripped of its individual indigenous identity to produce the figure of

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the singular European authority. This structural critique of archive-building is a significant strength of the paper, bridging the gap between historical methodology and modern heritage policy.

Recommendations for Improvement

While the manuscript presents a thoroughly researched and theoretically grounded argument, its narrative flow and analytical depth can be enhanced through a few targeted improvements. First, while the theoretical framework establishes a strong foundation, the transition from abstract concepts to empirical evidence could be made more seamless. The manuscript would benefit from a deeper engagement with specific historical case studies to illustrate how these "hidden custodians" operated in practice. For instance, providing a detailed narrative of a specific pandit deciphering an inscription, or a particular local community safeguarding a site prior to its "discovery" by the Archaeological Survey of India, would ground the theoretical framework in rich historical reality. This would also prevent the categories of indigenous actors from appearing too rigid or idealized, showing instead the fluid and often transactional nature of their engagement with colonial officials.

Second, the analysis of the mechanisms of historical invisibility requires further elaboration within the narrative prose. The concept of anonymous attribution and institutional authorship is highly sophisticated, but the paper should delve deeper into the linguistic and bureaucratic strategies employed in colonial reports to minimize indigenous contributions. Analyzing the specific rhetoric used in field logs, annual reports, and academic journals of the period would strengthen the argument. For example, examining how terms like "native informant" or "local assistant" were systematically deployed to diminish intellectual ownership would provide concrete textual evidence for the structural violence of the colonial archive. Additionally, the manuscript should briefly address the internal hierarchies among the indigenous actors themselves, exploring how caste, class, and education influenced which native voices were partially preserved in the record and which were entirely erased.

Finally, the concluding section on modern heritage policy could be integrated more tightly with the historical analysis. The transition from historical critique to contemporary application is vital, but it currently feels somewhat abrupt. To improve this, the author should expand the discussion on how the colonial legacy of top-down bureaucratic control continues to influence modern state-led conservation practices in South India. Demonstrating how contemporary local communities remain estranged from their own heritage due to these enduring colonial structures would underscore the urgent practical relevance of this historical revision.

Final Recommendation

This manuscript addresses a critical gap in the history of archaeology and colonial knowledge formation. It successfully shifts the focus from the institutional centers of imperial power to the periphery of field

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operations, restoring agency to the essential indigenous collaborators who shaped the discipline. The prose is sophisticated, the methodology is innovative, and the structural critique of the colonial archive is highly persuasive.

The revisions suggested above are intended to deepen the empirical grounding of the paper and refine its analytical arguments without requiring a fundamental restructuring of the core thesis. Therefore, I recommend the article for publication with **Minor Revision**.