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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 Name: Faheem Abdul Muneeb

Reviewer Report

Overall Assessment

The manuscript entitled "Hidden Custodians of India's Past: Indigenous Contributions to the Discovery and Preservation of Early Indian Inscriptions and Monuments (1750–1947)" addresses an important and increasingly relevant area within the historiography of Indian archaeology and heritage studies. The paper seeks to challenge conventional colonial narratives by foregrounding the contributions of indigenous actors—including temple custodians, pandits, munshis, artisans, village guides, hereditary communities, and other local intermediaries—to the discovery, preservation, interpretation, and transmission of India's archaeological and epigraphic heritage during the colonial period. Drawing upon decolonial archaeology, subaltern historiography, knowledge brokerage, and the co-production of knowledge, the study attempts to reconstruct a more inclusive understanding of archaeological knowledge production in colonial India. The topic is original, timely, and academically significant. Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned colonial monopolies over knowledge production, and this manuscript fits well within these

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evolving debates. The article successfully demonstrates that archaeological discoveries were rarely the achievements of colonial officials alone but emerged through sustained collaboration with indigenous communities whose contributions have often remained invisible within official records. The literature review is extensive, the theoretical engagement is ambitious, and the paper presents an innovative methodological framework that combines archival analysis, prosopography, citation-chain tracing, discovery-network analysis, and what the author terms "Footnote Archaeology." These methodological innovations distinguish the manuscript from conventional historical studies and provide an interesting framework for recovering marginalized actors from archival silences.

The manuscript is generally well structured and progresses logically from historiographical debates and theoretical foundations to methodology and thematic discussions on different categories of indigenous actors. The writing reflects familiarity with current debates in colonial history, archaeology, heritage studies, and decolonial scholarship. The article also possesses considerable interdisciplinary appeal, making it relevant to historians, archaeologists, heritage scholars, and researchers interested in colonial knowledge systems.

Overall, the manuscript represents a valuable contribution to the field and has the potential to stimulate further research on indigenous participation in archaeological knowledge production. Nevertheless, several aspects of the manuscript require refinement before publication. Most of these concerns relate to methodological clarification, analytical balance, presentation of evidence, and editorial improvements rather than fundamental weaknesses in the research itself. Accordingly, the manuscript is suitable for publication after minor revisions.

Strengths of the Paper

One of the strongest aspects of the manuscript is the originality of its research focus. While colonial archaeology in India has been studied extensively, comparatively little attention has been devoted to recovering the contributions of indigenous collaborators who facilitated archaeological discoveries and preservation efforts. By shifting the analytical focus from colonial administrators to local knowledge holders and intermediaries, the paper makes a meaningful contribution to contemporary debates on decolonizing archaeological historiography.

The literature review is comprehensive and demonstrates a strong command of both classical and contemporary scholarship. The author effectively brings together literature from colonial history, archaeology, history of science, subaltern studies, heritage studies, and decolonial theory. The discussion

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successfully situates the research within broader academic debates while clearly identifying the historiographical gap that the paper intends to address.

Another significant strength lies in the theoretical framework. Rather than relying on a single conceptual perspective, the manuscript integrates the concepts of co-production of knowledge, indigenous custodianship, history from below, decolonial archaeology, and knowledge brokerage into a broad analytical framework. Although further integration would enhance coherence, the framework provides an intellectually rich foundation for interpreting indigenous participation in archaeological discovery and preservation.

The methodological design is also one of the more innovative features of the paper. The use of archival reconstruction, prosopographical methods, citation-chain tracing, network analysis, and particularly the concept of "Footnote Archaeology" demonstrates originality in approaching colonial archives. Treating acknowledgements, appendices, marginal notes, and incidental references as valuable historical evidence offers a creative means of reconstructing hidden networks of archaeological collaboration. Such methodological innovation has the potential to be useful beyond the present case study and may inspire similar research in other colonial contexts.

The thematic organization of indigenous actors into categories such as temple custodians, pandits, munshis, artisans, local guides, community custodians, and knowledge intermediaries provides a useful analytical structure for readers. The discussion highlights that indigenous contributions extended far beyond simple assistance and instead involved preservation, interpretation, translation, documentation, logistical coordination, and transmission of historical knowledge. This broad categorization strengthens the paper's central argument that archaeological knowledge production was fundamentally collaborative rather than exclusively colonial.

Finally, the manuscript successfully contributes to current discussions on decolonizing heritage studies. By questioning conventional attribution practices and emphasizing the social processes underlying archaeological discoveries, the paper offers a broader understanding of knowledge production that recognizes both institutional and community-based contributions.

Areas to be Improved

While the manuscript presents a compelling conceptual argument, greater distinction between conceptual illustration and empirical findings is necessary. Several tables presented within the methodology,

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including the demonstration dataset, attribution statistics, distribution tables, and discovery-network examples, appear to function primarily as illustrative models rather than empirical results generated from completed archival analysis. Although the author acknowledges that these constitute a "constructed demonstration dataset," the presentation occasionally gives the impression that these statistics represent actual research findings. This distinction should be made much clearer throughout the manuscript to avoid confusion. If empirical analysis has already been conducted, additional explanation regarding data collection, coding procedures, and dataset construction should be provided. Alternatively, if these remain conceptual demonstrations, they should be clearly identified as methodological illustrations rather than research results.

The methodology section is detailed and innovative; however, it occasionally becomes overly descriptive. Significant space is devoted to explaining proposed analytical techniques, conceptual frameworks, and hypothetical datasets, while comparatively less attention is given to explaining how these methods were actually applied in the present study. Readers would benefit from a more concise methodology accompanied by clearer discussion of the actual archival material examined, the number of documents analyzed, criteria for selecting case examples, and procedures used for identifying indigenous actors within the historical sources.

The manuscript would also benefit from incorporating more concrete archival case studies throughout the discussion. Much of the argument remains conceptual, describing the types of indigenous actors and their likely contributions in general terms. The paper would become considerably stronger if each thematic section included specific historical examples drawn directly from archival records, Archaeological Survey of India reports, *Epigraphia Indica*, district gazetteers, or vernacular sources that clearly demonstrate how indigenous individuals contributed to particular discoveries or preservation efforts. Such evidence would reinforce the manuscript's central argument and provide stronger empirical support for its conclusions.

Although the theoretical discussion is comprehensive, the manuscript occasionally introduces multiple theoretical perspectives simultaneously without fully integrating them into a unified analytical framework. Concepts such as co-production of knowledge, history from below, decolonial archaeology, indigenous custodianship, and knowledge brokerage are each valuable, but their relationships sometimes remain implicit rather than explicitly connected. The manuscript would benefit from identifying one principal theoretical lens while positioning the remaining concepts as complementary analytical tools.

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This would improve conceptual coherence and make the theoretical contribution more clearly identifiable.

The manuscript consistently emphasizes indigenous agency, which constitutes one of its principal contributions. However, the analysis could become more balanced by acknowledging the complexity of colonial-indigenous interactions. Rather than presenting colonial institutions solely as appropriators of indigenous knowledge, the discussion could recognize that relationships often involved cooperation, negotiation, mutual dependence, institutional constraints, and varying degrees of recognition. Such nuance would strengthen the historical analysis and avoid creating an overly binary interpretation of colonial versus indigenous actors.

Another issue concerns the terminology employed throughout the manuscript. Expressions such as "hidden custodians," "footnote archaeology," and "discovery-network analysis" are innovative and intellectually engaging. However, some of these concepts would benefit from clearer definitions and stronger justification within existing methodological literature. Explaining how these concepts differ from or extend established historical and archaeological methodologies would strengthen their academic credibility.

The manuscript is generally well organized; however, certain sections could be streamlined to improve readability. There is occasional repetition of similar arguments concerning indigenous invisibility, colonial knowledge production, and archival silences across the introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, and later discussion. Reducing repetitive explanations would improve the overall flow while allowing greater emphasis on empirical analysis.

Finally, the manuscript requires careful editorial revision before publication. Minor grammatical inconsistencies, punctuation errors, uneven sentence construction, typographical mistakes, inconsistent capitalization, spacing issues, and formatting irregularities are present throughout the paper. Several lengthy paragraphs could also be divided into shorter, more readable sections. A comprehensive language edit would substantially improve the presentation of an otherwise well-researched manuscript and enhance its suitability for publication.

Recommendation

This manuscript addresses an important historiographical gap by recovering the contributions of indigenous actors to the discovery, preservation, and interpretation of India's archaeological and epigraphic heritage during the colonial period. The originality of the research question, the interdisciplinary theoretical engagement, and the innovative methodological framework constitute

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important strengths that make the paper a valuable contribution to debates on colonial knowledge production, decolonial archaeology, and heritage studies. Although several revisions relating to methodological clarification, empirical substantiation, theoretical integration, and editorial refinement are recommended, these issues do not undermine the overall quality or significance of the research. With minor revisions addressing the observations outlined above, the manuscript would make a meaningful contribution to scholarship on Indian archaeology, colonial historiography, and indigenous knowledge systems. Therefore, I recommend that the manuscript be **accepted with minor revisions**.