



Displaced Colonial Archives of Northeastern India: Ethnographic Documentation by Colonial Administrators

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India's indigenous communities were influenced by the complex power relations, exchange of cultures and socio-political developments during the colonial period. Inspired by antiquarian interest the British officials and ethnographers began to understand and record the region's distinct cultural heritage, indigenous rituals, agricultural practices and social systems. This ethnographic documentation sometimes reflected imperial viewpoints and intentions, though it provided information.

Displaced archives are a serious obstacle to modern historiography and cultural studies since they are physically and contextually fractured. Local access and research are hampered by the migration of these documents to institutions in UK. Furthermore, a critical re-examination of the interpretive frameworks utilised by colonial ethnographers is necessary. Digitising these archives would facilitate interdisciplinary approaches to researching the history of various communities in Northeastern India and assist academia worldwide, particularly in Asia.

This research will attempt to understand the process of displacement and fragmentation of archival records on Northeast India and its impact on historical research. It would also attempt to analyse the methods of archiving undertaken in the past, the documentation content, and their influence on the history of Northeastern India. It looks at the procedures used by British administrators, the kind and the extent of their records. The influence of the colonial archives can be seen in the historical understanding of Northeastern India. The objective of this study is to enhance the understanding of the past of the Northeastern region by examining the colonial documents and their historical and contemporary implications and emphasise on the current



initiatives to recover and reframe these lost archives and reinterpret these documents to investigate the nature of the displaced colonial archives.

Keywords: displaced archives, northeast India, Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

“If the ‘taste of the archive’ is in the heady rush of discovery, in the sensations and desires the archives stir.....the colonial archives are the bitter aftertaste of empire, the morsels left for us, their voracious contemporary readers.”

(Ann Laura Stoler ‘The Pulse of the Archive’ 2002)

Historians have confronted many challenges over the last few decades, some of which focus on the status of the archive itself, the seemingly immovable beginning point of the historian’s search. The displacement of Northeastern archival material in Europe refers to the scattering of historical documents and records from Northeastern India, particularly during the colonial period. Many archival materials were taken to European countries, mainly the UK, for various reasons. British Colonial administrators took these documents back to the UK for record-keeping and reference purposes. The experience and delight of the historical artefacts is not just restricted to the feelings of historians but to a larger audience. The Archive is deep-rooted and integral as a part of our inherent heritage. The history that we are reading is a colonial sense of reading, and researchers do not have access to indigenous archival sources. After the process of decolonisation, the archival records are available to Indians during the post-independence period only and accessing the archives has been a major challenge. The Colonial collection of Photographs is also a representation of the colonial gaze and there is a need to construct the colonial gaze with our indigenous methods.

The difference between archives and museums lies in the nature of their collections and how they use them. Archives are primarily concerned with original records, documents, papers, or digital files created or received by an individual, family, or organisation in the transaction of business or other transactions. The importance of the archival material lies in its context, its organic relationship to the records surrounding it, and its function as evidence of an activity.



Museums primarily collect and conserve artifacts, objects, artworks, and specimens that are valued for their cultural, historical, scientific, or aesthetic significance as individual items. While museums often hold records (archives of their own operations or manuscript collections), their core mission involves interpreting and exhibiting these tangible objects to the general public on a regular basis. Thus, archives are engaged in record preservation and context for evidence, while museums prioritise object preservation and interpretation for public education. An on-site museum is set up where the artefacts were originally used, created, or excavated. The artefacts can be viewed within their original, physical context, enhancing the sense of place and authenticity. A museum is geographically separated from the site or culture whose relics it holds and portrays. These museums are often located far from the place of origin of the artefacts. This geographical separation raises critical questions about ownership, cultural context, and accessibility for the originating community. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and the Cambridge University Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology can be viewed as two sites, where the displaced colonial archive is visible. These institutions provide unrivalled insights into the cultural and historical fabric of the River Brahmaputra, a mighty river that flows through this region. These museums provide unmatched insights into the river's complex cultural and historical fabric, due to their extensive collections of images, letters, diaries, and narratives that document the travels and boat journeys of several officials giving an account of ethnic groups and villages along the river, their life-ways, myths, beliefs and practices. These archives highlight the river's importance as a lifeline and demonstrate how it has shaped local identities, customs, and means of subsistence. These records provide a significant contribution to our understanding of the River Brahmaputra's complex role in forming the past and present of the communities it supports through interdisciplinary research.

The river Brahmaputra being a formidable river defines the region. M'cosh, a surgeon by profession (1837), in his extensive account, refers to "that extensive tract of country on either side of the Brahmaputra". The river Brahmaputra has moulded the history and culture of the region from the earliest times. Surgeon-Major L. A. Waddell (1886-87), based on a Tibetan legend, associates the Brahmaputra with the River Tsangpo near Lhasa. It is interesting to note that the Tibetan word Tsang-po is the literal equivalent of the Sanskrit Brahmaputra, and means the son of Brahma. It is known as the 'River of Tibet and North East India' in the colonial



accounts due to its sheer size and utility; the Brahmaputra ranks among the most important rivers in the world (Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India, 1905:167). Northeastern India is a fertile region shaped by the river Brahmaputra, known for its rich agricultural production, including rice, tea, and jute. It is bordered by the Eastern Himalayas to the north and the Patkai and Naga hills to the south. The area is also noted for its biodiversity and cultural diversity, home to various indigenous communities.

PAST SCHOLARSHIP

The North-eastern region has been of interest to scholars of varied backgrounds. Since the colonial period scholars have been involved in writing their accounts about this region. Apart from the ethnographic and general accounts there exists the whole genre of data, that came about due to the antiquarian interest of the colonial administrators. The colonial perceptions filtered down and is even visible in the present day scholarship. The Missionary and Colonial accounts are the first to have looked at the history of this region. In 1838, Captain Francis Jenkin documented his experiences in Assam in his diary and the British documents mention the Assam-Burma path to China.

The Brahmaputra valley is described as "that extensive tract of country on either side of the Brahmaputra" by McCosh, in his 1837 book Topography of Assam. He does a commendable job, outlining precise routes from the valley to China, Tibet, Bhutan, Bengal, and Burma. He chronicles the history of Assam following the Ahom invasion, starting in the thirteenth century. Discussions cover a wide range of topics, including animal species, metals, political organisations, health issues, revenue systems, and hill tribes. He saw the tribes as "criminals" and "barbarians."

In her study, Stoler (2002) makes the case that anthropologists working on post-colonial studies take a historical stance and depend on the archives. Their archival research tends to be less anthropological and more extractive. Documents are still interpreted in a fragmented way to demonstrate how cultural claims are suppressed or to validate the colonial construction of particular practices. The unusual placement and form are rarely taken into consideration while mining the content of government commissions, reports, and other archival records. Instead of using the "archive as a source," scholars should consider the "archive as a subject." The study



makes the case that academics should see archives as monuments of knowledge production rather than as locations for knowledge retrieval.

The records produced and preserved at the National archives in India are the result of various entanglements of India as a colony and its people as colonial subjects, and these records were extensively used by historians of late medieval and modern India to write a "definite" history of India. Professional historians with a positivist background in colonial as well as post-colonial India considered the "empirical facts" embedded in colonial archives as the primary sources and claimed their "factually correct" version as "true" history. However, in the later period, historians from different historiographical schools used the same colonial archives contradistinctively, along with non-archival sources, to write alternative histories of "many Indias." Contouring Indian history in political terms alone, and being silent on other issues, has tended to blot out the historical veracity of these source materials. Further, major epistemic shifts in subaltern and feminist historiographical discourse have prompted scholars to raise serious questions about the "unquestionable" validity of colonial archives, apart from trying to fill the vacuum created by the selective employment of colonial archives by a variety of scholars from different schools. Despite these developments, one can still see a significant space for studying the archives their genesis, collection, preservation, and accessibility (Aziz 16: 33).

This paper will highlight the nature and problems associated with the repositories of culture on Northeast India in UK museums and the need for the process of decolonisation as these repositories can be viewed not only as repositories of culture but these are also a reflection of the knowledge possessed by the ethnic communities belonging to the Northeastern region.

Sites of Cultural Repository: A Case study of Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford)

General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers (1827–1900) is renowned as an early British archaeologist and was the donor of the founding ethnographic and archaeological collections to the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford in 1884. The Museum was established in 1884, when General Pitt-Rivers, a prominent figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology, gave his collection to the University of Oxford. Augustus Henry



Lane Fox was born in 1827 in Yorkshire. In 1882 Pitt-Rivers was appointed as the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments and he died in 1900, at the age of 73. The Museum houses the ethno-archaeological collection bequeathed to Oxford in 1884 by him. Four years before this, Fox inherited 32,000 acres of wooded estate, and the surname Pitt-Rivers, from his cousin Horace. In this estate, Pitt-Rivers carried out some of the first scientific archaeological excavations. It was in vogue to mostly account for exotic trophy items. Pitt-Rivers accounted for all the material that was unearthed (Yadav 2025: 15).

Pitt-Rivers' fascination with gathering archaeological and ethnographic artefacts stemmed from his initial professional interests in firearm development. Eventually, he began amassing a diverse range of weapon types, along with items like textiles, wooden carvings, and decorative pieces. It is widely thought that Pitt-Rivers personally engaged in minimal field collecting; however, he did acquire items while stationed in Malta and during the Crimean War. As he got older, it appears he gathered items during his business-related travels and vacations overseas. The majority of the items were sourced from dealers, auction houses, and other members of the Anthropological Institute. He donated his collection to the University of Oxford with the stipulation that they construct a museum to accommodate it, hire a lecturer to educate about it, and uphold the overall method of exhibition. The Museum showcases archaeological and ethnographic artifacts from various regions around the globe. General Pitt Rivers' initial donation featured over 26,000 items, yet today there are more than half a million accumulated over the years (Official website of the Pitt Rivers Museum).

The primary strength of the Museum's Asian photography collection is its Tibetan section, considered among the most important globally. A significant project funded by the Trades and Humanities Research Council from 2003 to 2005 digitised 6,000 Tibetan photographs from the Museum, captured between 1920 and 1950, along with an abundance of visual and interactive content. Other important collections include those gathered in Nagaland; Robert Woodthorpe's collections from the late nineteenth century, J.H. Hutton, Henry Balfour, and Charles Pawsey during the 1920s, Ursula Graham Bower in the 1930s and 1940s, Charles Robert Stonor in the



1940s, and Milada Ganguli in the 1970s mark it as one of the most crucial collections for comprehending the social history of North-East India.

The documents of prominent early administrators and anthropologists linked to the Museum, along with records pertaining to the Museum's establishment and early history are accessible. Documents and correspondence associated with the Museum's collections encompass special collections of field notes, works on paper, and other materials particularly relevant to the Museum's focus. The collections of handwriting serve as a significant resource for researchers examining the history of galleries and anthropology. The documents of James Philip Mills (1890-1960), an administrator and ethnographer, contain a box of materials primarily concerning Nagaland and Assam, which includes correspondence, a journal, and notes. This leads to a break in access to libraries because archival records needed to study community history are unavailable.

The papers of Robert Gosset Woodthorpe (1844-1898), a British army officer, consist of a box of materials primarily connected to India, including Nagaland, as well as Thailand. The content comprises journals, notes, and watercolour drawings, along with a reprint of a composition. The library also contains the Papers of Henry Balfour (1863-1939), who was a British archaeologist and the inaugural curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Thirty boxes of items comprise fourteen related to musical instruments and one roll of drawings, specifically pertaining to Balfour's role as the inaugural curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum (1891-1939) along with his study of the collections and also disorganised notes. The collection consists of letters, diaries, scrapbooks, scattered notes, drawings, critique articles, and various other items. There are twenty-three drawings of the Naga Hills, created between 1922 and 1923, primarily illustrating individuals, dwellings, and tattoo patterns. There are two field journals and sketchbooks without dates.

The collection of Ursula Violet Graham Betts, formerly Bower (1914-1989), included significant documents from her role as a pioneering anthropologist in the Naga Hills, containing one box of materials regarding Bower's study of Naga textiles. The documents consist of letters, a diary, a notebook, and preliminary calligraphic and typed drafts. The



documents have not been recorded in detail as of now. There exist documents of Sir Henry Walter George Cole (1866-1932), a military officer, and Lady Mai Kathleen Cole (fl. 1915- fl. 1920). There exists a box of resources associated with the language and writing system of Manipur. The documents consist of letters, written remarks, and a reprint of a paper. The collection of John Henry Hutton (1885-1968), anthropologist and administrator, consists of five boxes of material primarily concerning Nagaland and Assam. The content consists of letters, memos, and drawings (Official website of Pitt Rivers Museum). The majority of these documents have not been thoroughly catalogued, creating a significant obstacle for visitors and researchers trying to locate these papers for their current or future studies. Many of these documents have yet to be digitised, rendering them unavailable to the researcher.

Study of North-eastern Textiles and the Role of UK Museums and Archives

Northeastern textiles bring forward a rich and a very complex tradition of artistry, spirituality, and ecological knowledge. The British colonisation in the nineteenth century, in Northeast India resulted in the growth, adaptation and also displacement of many of these artefacts. British colonial rulers distributed across European institutions such as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Manchester Museum. Textiles, ornaments, manuscripts, and ritual objects from Assam, Nagaland, and Meghalaya embody deep local histories but have been reframed through imperial narratives of progress and preservation (Goswami, 2019; Thomas, 2020). The British annexation of Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 marked the beginning of a systematic colonial encounter with the material cultures of the region (Anderson, 2015). Administrators and Missionaries continued looking at documenting, collecting these and archiving as an extension of their ethnographic mission. Edward Tuite Dalton (1872/2002) defined the region's communities according to racial hierarchies by acquiring objects which later became the foundation to museum collections like those in Oxford and London. These collecting practices were justified as preservation efforts for "vanishing" cultures, obscuring the role of colonial disruption in producing such disappearance.



Image 1: Eri Silk moth as displayed in Manchester Museum, UK.

Among the most emblematic textiles, the artefacts from Northeast India which are displayed in England are mainly Assamese silk textiles which talk about the history of *Muga*, *Pat* and *Eri* silk of Assam that have long been a specialised art of Assamese rearers and weavers, who produced and wove well-crafted silk that has an ecological atonement and socio-cultural identity as well (Devi, 2016). Craftmanship that includes rearing, producing silk, dyeing the fabric, designing them with local motifs gave a separate value that the rest of the fabrics gave a distinct identity. Under the Ahom dynasty, silk acquired a royal value with weaving becoming



a part of every household of Assamese community and eventually got a ceremonial status. However, British administration commodified these textiles, sending them to international exhibitions including the 1851 Great Exhibition, where they were interpreted as exotic yet technically advanced products (Sen, 2017). The Vrindavani Vastra was shifted and relocated to the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Vastra came to signify universal sacred art rather than a living Vaishnavite tradition (Chakraborty, 2019).

The term Vrindavani Vastra was first used in *Katha-Gurucharita*, which is believed to be a work of the 18th century, much after the birth of Sankaradeva. According to Blurton (2016), few folk narratives regarding Krishna may have been weaved in this Vastra. This shift exemplifies the colonial curation redefined devotional artefacts within secular museum paradigms. This further epitomises the exquisite craftsmanship and sustainability of eco-friendly characteristics of Assamese textile. Further collection of raw materials of *Muga*, *Eri*, *Pat* cocoons and showcasing them in the museum of Manchester is another pleasant part of the British collections.

The Pitt Rivers Museum, displayed cultural objects based on function—tools, ornaments, weapons—under an evolutionary logic that placed Indigenous societies at early stages of human progress (Ames, 2010). Objects that once held ritual vitality became aestheticised specimens. A Naga headhunting necklace or a woollen coat or a Khasi ceremonial basket was interpreted as evidence of cultural primitiveness rather than complex social symbolism (Thomas, 2020). Assamese silks were prized for craftsmanship but detached from the women's communal labour that sustained them (Goswami, 2019). The museum's glass case thus became a metaphor for colonial containment—a visual strategy that neutralised the vitality of cultural difference. Various agricultural tools mostly used by several Northeastern communities like the Bodo, Tiwa, Naga, Karbi and Manipuri are being archived in here. Naga implements and weapons like Naga *Daos* of different shapes and sizes are displayed here. Textile tools such as flying shuttles of north-eastern communities are also available here.



Image 2: Assamese Textile Weaving Shuttles, collected in 1923, displayed in Pitt Rivers Museum



The cultural heritage of Northeast India preserved in British museums summarises the histories of belief, skill, and imperial extraction. Each displaced artefact is weaved, woven, carved, or inscribed and handcrafted that reveals the tension between colonial domination and indigenous resilience. However, the history of Northeastern textile craftsmanship coming down during the British colonial period can be contradicted with the presence status of resurgence and reestablishment of these textile archival units.

CONCLUSION

Efforts are being made to digitise and make available to the researchers these artefacts of cultural representation and the ethnographic writings of the administrator and Anthropologists. Despite the efforts towards digitisation much remains to be done even in the institutions of UK, making it a challenging task for researchers and scholars from the North- Eastern region and other regions of India to research their own artistic and literal heritage. During our present (2025) visit to the libraries and museums in UK, the problems of accessing these records could be experienced. Due to shortage of manpower in most archives and museums, researchers who are visiting for a short period are unable to access these documents. And there is always the colonial gaze and biasness, that is present and continues that researchers face. With many libraries and museums providing financial support to the researchers for a short period of study, yet the decolonisation of the mind and the archive needs to be carried out.



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