



Event Summary

Monday November 3, 2025

- On November 3, 2025, the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP), in partnership with King's College London, NYU Abu Dhabi, and the New International Histories of South Asia (NIHSA) network, hosted the second session of its Archives and Policy Seminar Series titled "Whose History, Whose Voice?: Forging Equity in the Indian Archives."
- The discussion featured **Jishnu Barua**, Former Chief Secretary of Assam, who shared insights from his experience leading the transformation of the Assam State Archives, and was moderated by **Constantino Xavier**, Senior Fellow, CSEP and **Khushi Singh Rathore**, Max Weber Fellow, EUI and Non-Resident Associate Fellow, CSEP.
- The seminar brought together archivists, policymakers, and scholars for a focused conversation on equity in India's archival landscape, whose histories are recorded, which institutions are prioritised, and how representation and access can be strengthened across national and state archives.
- The Archives and Policy Seminar Series is a closed-door discussion platform curated by CSEP, King's College London, NYU Abu Dhabi, and the NIHSA network to explore challenges and policy solutions for improving archival access and governance in India.
- Initiated by **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP and Visiting Professor of International Relations, Ashoka University; **Constantino Xavier**, Senior Fellow, CSEP; **Bérénice Guyot-Réchard**, Reader (Associate Professor) in International and South Asian History, King's College London; and **Rahul Sagar**, Associate Professor of Political Science, NYU Abu Dhabi, the series is curated by **Khushi Singh Rathore**, Non-Resident Associate Fellow, CSEP.

Rebuilding the Archive: Lessons from Assam

The discussion focused on the revitalisation of the Assam State Archives, highlighting how a combination of individual initiative and infrastructural reform transformed it from a neglected repository into a well-organised and researcher-friendly institution. Key milestones in this process included the comprehensive verification and cataloguing of records, digitisation of extensive map collections, and improvements to reading rooms and archival facilities. The establishment of a functional website and search interface further enhanced accessibility for scholars.

The conversation also highlighted the archive's existing internship programme, which allows students from nearby universities to work on cataloguing and preservation projects—a model that could be replicated in other state archives to enhance public engagement and build professional capacity. The Assam experience illustrated how

motivated leadership, and procedural clarity can produce visible institutional change within limited resources. It also underscored the importance of sustaining such progress through consistent policy backing and knowledge-sharing across states.

Bridging Inequities Across the Archival Landscape

The conversation then turned to the broader challenge of ensuring equity across India's archival ecosystem. While national repositories often receive greater visibility and support, many state archives continue to face structural limitations, uneven funding, and staff shortages. The discussion emphasised the need for stronger coordination between national and state institutions, and for greater recognition of regional archives as vital contributors to India's public knowledge infrastructure.

Suggestions included developing a unified national index of archival holdings, establishing formal mechanisms for inter-state cooperation through regular meetings, and making greater use of social media and digital communication channels to exchange updates, circulate best practices, and share developments in real time. These steps, it was noted, could help build an active and connected community of archives officials and strengthen collaboration across India's diverse archival ecosystem.

These proposals reflected a growing consensus that equity in archives must go beyond access, it must also involve representation, collaboration, and fair distribution of resources across the archival landscape.

Record-Keeping and the Vanishing Contemporary Archive

The session also reflected on the evolving challenges of record management in post-independence India. It was noted that while colonial-era materials are relatively well preserved and often include detailed minutes, memoranda, and debates, such comprehensive documentation has significantly declined in the decades since independence. Many departments no longer record or retain detailed discussions of official meetings, resulting in administrative and policy records that are increasingly fragmentary. This gap, it was observed, will make it difficult for future historians to reconstruct decision-making processes and study the contemporary period in depth.

The discussion situated this as part of a broader global phenomenon, where the rise of born-digital documentation, emails, electronic files, and digital communication platforms, has led to fewer deliberative details being formally captured or archived. This shift raises important questions about how institutional and bureaucratic histories will be studied in the future, and what measures are required to ensure that critical records of governance are preserved.

An important suggestion that emerged was to undertake a comprehensive stock-taking of existing documents across archives, as many catalogued files are no longer physically available or traceable. Accurate verification of holdings, it was noted, is essential to ensure the authenticity and

completeness of archival indices and to support future research.

Building Capacity and Inclusive Archival Futures

The discussion underscored that sustaining archival reform depends as much on human capital as on institutional frameworks. Chronic financial constraints continue to impede archival upkeep, with many state archives operating on limited budgets that restrict preservation work, cataloguing, and infrastructure improvements. It was noted that funding shortfalls often delay essential maintenance and digitisation efforts, leaving archives dependent on temporary measures or individual initiative rather than systemic support.

The conversation also highlighted the acute shortage of specialised staff, especially record suppliers, sorters, and assistant archivists, whose roles are essential for maintaining the flow of documents between storage and researchers. In several archives, these positions are held by a handful of committed individuals, making the system overly dependent on personal effort rather than institutional continuity. Expanding such posts and ensuring sustained professional training were identified as critical steps toward strengthening operational efficiency.

Another key concern raised was the difficulty in recruiting qualified leadership. There have been cases where the post of Director in certain Archives has remained vacant, as few applicants are willing to take up the role under current conditions. It was suggested that revising recruitment rules and making these positions more financially and professionally rewarding would help attract individuals with both administrative experience and a genuine commitment to archival development.

Collectively, these reflections pointed to the need for steady investment, morale-building measures, and policy attention to the people who sustain India's archival system. By addressing financial and professional bottlenecks alongside infrastructural reforms, archives can evolve into more resilient and responsive public institutions capable of meeting the growing demands of researchers and citizens alike.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

*This event summary is prepared by **Khushi Singh Rathore**, Non-Resident Fellow, CSEP and **Kiran Chahuan**, PhD Candidate, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
For queries, please contact **Gurmeet Kaur**, Events Manager, CSEP at GKaur@csep.org*

Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)

6, Second Floor, Dr. Jose P. Rizal Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, India



Centre for Social and
Economic Progress



@CSEP_Org



Centre for Social
and Economic
Progress



www.csep.org