



India's history held captive

July 18, 2007

India will celebrate the 60th anniversary of its Independence next month. It will be an occasion to rejoice because India has done tremendously well in recent years. After New Delhi was forced to drop Moscow's model of planned economy, India started finding its true place in the comity of nations. But, unfortunately, there are still areas in which the nation has not moved an inch from the Bolshevik-style of thinking. One of these areas is the state's obsession with secrecy over archival documents

The files pertaining to Indian foreign policy are still privately owned by one family that has full control over it. Even in the worst of banana republics, such a situation does not arise for the simple reason that no family is able to hold on to power so long. But in incredible India, everything is possible.

Two new releases remind us of this wound. The first is a book, *In Quest of Jinnah*, edited by Sharif Al Mujahid. It is the diary of Hector Bolitho, Jinnah's official biographer. Though the task was assigned to him by Liaquat Ali Khan, Bolitho was not given access to any official files. He had to rely on interviews with people who had known Jinnah. But that is not all, after Bolitho submitted his manuscript to Majeed Malik, the then Pakistani Principal Information Officer, large portions were excised. It was so heavily sanitised that Bolitho had to fully rewrite the biography to make it fit with the hero image of Quaid-e-Azam.

The newly released book is the story of Bolitho's lost battle against the Pakistani authorities. Is the situation different in India, where only a handful of 'eminent' historians are allowed to access Jawaharlal Nehru's papers? Is it not shocking that 60 years after independence, while politicians are ready to fight for some letters of little historical interest written by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, nobody is ready to point a finger at the entire diplomatic archives of the nation kept under seal.

The second release pertains to the recent declassification of a huge amount of material by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This was done to comply with the US Freedom of Information Act. When one knows that the CIA is the most difficult nut to crack, it is shameful that India's Ministry of External Affairs is acting in a worse manner than the CIA.

Among the declassified CIA documents, the *Caesar-Polo-Esau Papers* are more interesting. They comprise 147 documents and 11,000 pages of in-depth analysis and research from 1953 to 1973. A large number of newly declassified monographs give the CIA assessments on the situation in the Soviet Union and China.

Can't we expect Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to publish one day even a 'sanitised' assessment of, say, the 1971 operations? It is doubtful when even the MEA has not released a single file related to Jammu & Kashmir or China in the past 60 years.

A few years back, I was shown a rulebook in the National Archives, stating that all documents relating to the Gilgit Area (meaning Kashmir and North-West India) were 'closed' after 1923, while those relating to NEFA (which include relations with Tibet) have not been accessible to the public after 1913. It's soon going to be a century since then!

The fools who made this inaccessibility rule were probably unaware that most of the papers are available at India Office in London for the period till 1947. I have personally collected the list of hundreds of files available in London on Tibet. In fact, till 1951 some Indian officers continued to feed the British Government with information on the 'frontiers'.

If someone were to ask me what is the greatest scam since Independence, I would have no difficulty in answering. It is not the Bofors scandal or the jeep case involving Nehru's protégé, Krishna Menon. It is the confiscation of history by successive Indian Governments under the Public Records Act. The rule states: "Unclassified public records more than 30 years old should be made available to any *bona fide* research scholar, but subject to such *exceptions and restrictions* as may be prescribed".

In the recent CIA declassification, what 'broke the news' in India was mainly the three-part report on the 1962 China war. These reports, largely based on the Government of India's White Papers on China, contain nothing new for those who have read those documents, but they point to the irony that India's own report on the war is still a state secret.

After the debacle in the 1962 war, Gen JN Chaudhuri constituted a committee to study the causes of the 'Himalayan blunder'. An Anglo-Indian General, Henderson Brooks, was requested to prepare a report. Though some 'guilty' officials in the Defence Ministry tried their best to conceal the records, Brooks and his colleague PS Bhagat presented their study a few months later to Jawaharlal Nehru. This was immediately classified as 'Top Secret'. Why?

Those who have gone through the numbered paragraphs of the report (some 200 pages) found it riveting. The blame was clearly laid on the

'Kaul Boys' - Gen BM Kaul and his friends in the Army headquarters who had climbed the ladder in no time because they were the most 'pliable' officers around. 'Pliability' was already a criterion of selection and promotion!

In his report, Brooks wrote of "wanton disregard of the elementary principles of war". For example, on orders from Delhi, "troops of (the entire Seventh Brigade) were dispersed to outposts that were militarily unsound and logistically unsupportable".

Who had appointed Kaul? The answer explains why the report remains classified. Another pearl from the Brooks report: "The Defence Minister (Krishna Menon) categorically stated that in view of the top secret nature of conferences, no minutes would be kept."

A passing, but interesting, comment in the CIA papers on the 1962 war is about the Sino-Indian border talks held in 1960: "(It)... proved detrimental to Peiping's (Beijing) historical and legal case... The Indian case owing much to the excellent and extensive administrative records of the British... was impressive. It was argued adroitly on many points of fact, logic and international law." The report of the negotiations was so favourable to India that the Government of India was quick to publish it, while Beijing kept it secret. Mr MK Narayanan, the National Security Adviser, should ask his Chinese counterpart to study this report, if he has not done so already.

Is it not foolishness on the part of the Government to refuse to declassify its archives? Indeed, the opening of the archives would not jeopardise India's security, but in most cases help strengthen India's argument.

Of course, the Congress Government would then have to acknowledge that 'pliability' has too often been a decisive factor which has, in the long run, harmed India's interests. But the Government owes the

nation access to its history on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Independence.