

One more Irony

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A few months ago the transcripts of Kissinger's secret trips to Beijing in 1971 were declassified by the US. These clandestine visits to Beijing were meant to prepare President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972. The documents make extraordinary reading and throw new lights on America's thinking on the eve the Bangladesh war. Some remarks of Kissinger are particularly interesting: He tells Zhou Enlai: *"I read the book by Maxwell that the Prime Minister recommended to me last time, and it is our view, certainly at the White House, that the Indians are applying the same tactics to that situation as they did to you."*

Kissinger refers to Neville Maxwell's book *India's China War*, which, according to him, demonstrates that India is an aggressive nation which bullied China during the 1962 war. Later in the discussion, the Chinese premier comes back to Maxwell's book: *"We (Chinese) understand best the traditions of India. After having read the book of Maxwell you also believe it (bullying others) is the traditional policy of India."* What is amazing is the fact that Maxwell, an India baiter, has managed to get hold of the Henderson Brooks report on the 1962 debacle to write his own version of history. Who, in India today, has seen the report? They can be counted on the fingers tips. Though written nearly 40 years ago, this report is "classified" and not accessible to researchers or even military strategists. India's tragedy is that today lakhs of files are still 'secret' or 'classified' or 'restricted'. The Public Records Act vaguely states that '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.' This allows the secretive bureaucracy to keep the files closed. The sad fact is that only scholars with 'special contacts' like Maxwell or close to the Congress regime and the Nehru family, have been able to get a darshan of the Nehru papers and other archival documents.

A few years ago, when I was researching on the history of modern relations between India and Tibet, I went through the painful exercise of trying to access some documents prior to the Chinese invasion (1950). I was told in the National Archives of India (NAI) that all

documents for NEFA area (which includes Tibet and Bhutan) are 'classified' after 1913, nobody could access them. Then I tried my chance at the Nehru Library, the repository of the famous Nehru's Papers. No luck again. Not only are the Nehru Papers 'classified' but they belong to the Nehru family. I could not comprehend how official letters and notes could belong to a family or an individual and not the state, but I was politely told: "It is like that... you cannot do anything about it".

Even when Rajiv Gandhi tried to give some access to classified archives on a "selective basis" to researchers, the move was blocked by officials. Anyway, I stubbornly tried to go deeper into the matter and spoke one day to a senior politician who had just joined the newly-formed BJP government. He answered: *"In our mind, we still are in the Opposition, but we will soon do something about it."*

The years passed and nothing happened. One more irony: In the case of India -Tibet relations, most of the papers from 1914 till 1952-53 are opened for researchers in the India Office Library and Records in London and can be freely used by historians. The same files are 'classified' in India. I once sent a Government official a list of several hundreds of files available in London, which could easily be declassified in India.

Of course, I never received an answer. More recently, I began working on the Kashmir issue and again, I attempted to access the files of 1947-48. No chance! The Kashmir problem is not solved, the opening of the files would jeopardize an eventual solution! This is where there is something definitively wrong with the Secret of the Officials. Everyone knows that India has a golden case and instead of giving access to material on the subject, it appears that India is hiding something. Indian officials are sometimes surprised that the foreign press does not portray the Kashmir issue as it should be. But if India obstinately persists in hiding her good case, what else can it expect? Even a regime such as Fidel Castro's in Cuba recently declassified all the documents related to the 1962 Bay of Pigs incidents. Is not India mature enough, 55 years after independence, to look squarely into its past? Even if its leaders have committed some minor or major blunders, is it not the time to learn from it instead of hiding them on the dusty shelves of the MeA or the NAI?