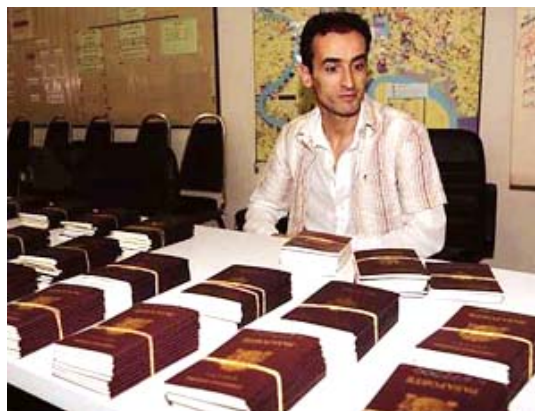


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## Confiscated History

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It is a pleasant surprise to see that India's image is changing in the West. Some 30 years ago, when I left France to settle in South India, my family and friends considered it a shocking decision. To leave France, a "developed" country, and emigrate to the end of the world, to the "land of misery", populated by elephants and cobras, was unimaginable!

During a recent visit to France, I was discussing India with some young university students. They told me that for a student in France today, it was a great value-add in a CV to have undergone training or an internship in India. This Indian wave has been reinforced since Mittal Steel tried to purchase Arcelor, the jewel of French steel industry; today many in the West are admiring when they hear the name "India".

India is undoubtedly a land with a great future. Though the nation has grown and matured during the last few decades, though, unfortunately not all domains are as rosy. The babus running one of the largest bureaucracies in the world have not been able to change their mindset. A particularly bothering

aspect is the confiscation of India's modern history by antiquated rules and regulations, red-tapism and obscurantism.

I believe that the study of the history of the sub-continent could be one of the keys to disentangling difficult problems such as the Kashmir issue. Unfortunately, nobody can today access the primary sources: they are locked in the vaults of the Nehru Memorial Library or in the almirahs of South Block. (I am told they are very dusty!)

All those who tried to access historical documents since India's independence will tell you that till the end of babudom, one bureaucrat or another will ensure that you do not access the dusty files. Without fail, you will be courteously informed that India's security and integrity will be endangered if these precious documents are opened to the public.

Recently the book *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World* by Prof. Christopher Andrew has triggered a flurry of comments in the Indian press. Although the ways in which the KGB influenced "non-aligned" nations was known to everybody, the very existence of such secret archives was questioned.

This can only make one smile when one knows that reputed institutions such as the Cold War International History Project at the Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, have organised seminars and conferences on these particular archives. The interesting point is that this Institute, like many others in the West, has been collecting, translating and publishing declassified documents not only from the US Administration but also from the former Communist bloc. Most of their publications, a testimony of their scholarly work, are freely available on their website.

I admire the United States for one thing: official documents are scrupulously made available to the public, whether after the 30-year classification period is over or when a reasonable demand is made to the Administration under the Freedom of Information Act. Further, there are several organisations or lobby

groups in the US whose only work is to make sure that the law is followed to the letter and spirit. Similarly in France, the government declassifies old documents quite rigorously. Though India has recently armed itself with a new legislation, the Right to Information Act 2005 (RIA), unfortunately the new law only continues to help those who do not want India's history to be known.

Article 8 (1) (a) says: that "there shall be no obligation to give any citizen — (a) information, disclosure of which would prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the State, relation with foreign State or lead to incitement of an offence." This paragraph is enough to cover all the files of the Ministry of External Affairs, Defense and Home. Where is the right of the people of India to know their own history?

While the bureaucrats do not see any meaning in opening the old files, Indian politicians see their own interests in the closure of the archives: it could make them accountable. As a result, if you ask for any files related to Kashmir, Russia or China in the National Archives of India, your request will be marked "NT", meaning "not transferred".

After trying for many years to do something about this, I capitulated: I realise that I will not see any historical files in this lifetime for the simple reason that nobody is interested in changing the established state of affairs (which is reinforced by the RIA). I was told that once former Prime Minister IK Gujral had shown some interest in the matter. Unfortunately, he did not remain at the helm long enough.

I recently came across some new developments, not in India but in the US. First the National Security Archives released what they termed a "Massive Collection of Formerly Secret and Top Secret Transcripts of Henry Kissinger's Meetings with World Leaders". Can you believe it? A total of 28,386 pages of verbatim records of the Kissinger talks?

Walter Isaacson, the author of the former Secretary of State's biography, wrote: "Henry Kissinger's memos of conversation are an amazing, fascinating and absolutely indispensable resource for understanding his years in power. No history of the Vietnam War, the China opening, the negotiations with Moscow, or the Middle East would be complete without studying these documents."

As Prof. Thomas Schwartz of Vanderbilt University pointed out: "In these memoranda and meeting transcripts, students can see the development of America's policies toward almost every part of the globe — a unique teaching resource, carefully organised and thoroughly accessible."

My question is, if India wants to become a great power, why is her youth not allowed to know about her past? Ironically, the Kissinger's memcons (memorandum of conversation) go deep into topics related to India's recent history, such as:

The US-China rapprochement (at India's cost), including initial White House efforts to communicate with Beijing, Kissinger's "secret trip" to China in July 1971 and President Nixon's visit in 1971.

The developments in South Asia, including the 1971 India-Pakistan war and the Nixon-Kissinger tilt to Pakistan during the crisis.

A few weeks earlier, when it opened up State Department document databases from 1973 and 1974, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the official organ of the US, put almost 3,20,000 declassified cables online. The most impressive aspect is that the text of declassified diplomatic cables, superbly indexed is now retrievable from the NARA website. It also includes withdrawal cards of documents that are still classified, so that they can be requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Out of 119,356 documents for 1973 and 200,508 for 1974, I found that 7,484 were related to India.

To add insult to injury, the secretive CIA has established a reading room on its site to provide the public with an overview of access to previously released documents. The Agency apologises that everything could not be declassified "because of CIA's need to comply with the national security laws of the United States... however, a substantial amount of CIA information has been and/or can be released following review." The site even indicates to the researcher his rights "on the various methods of obtaining this information".

Meanwhile in India, history continues to be confiscated. Is it the hallmark of a mature nation? The politicians can undoubtedly sleep soundly. No skeleton will ever be found in their cupboards except if it comes from abroad, in which case, it will be dismissed as the work of 'foreign hands'.