



## ***Nehru's or India's Papers?***

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The current Lok Sabha election campaign has not generated much heat on "foreign affairs"; indeed, there has been more on the foreign origin of one of the candidates. Not having had the good karma to be born Indian, however, it will not be proper for me to comment on that.

Personally, I have nothing to say about Ms Sonia Gandhi, but there is a matter which makes me very uncomfortable. Being the heiress of the Nehru family, by regal inheritance she has become the "owner" of the Nehru Papers, the correspondence and notes written by Nehru as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of India. This is certainly one of the most deplorable post-independence scams and what is even more shocking is the fact that nobody in India seems willing to take up the issue.

The question is why should the official correspondence of a prime minister belong to his family? One could admit that very personal or intimate letters could be left in the custody of the family, but why the officials papers? It is legally and constitutionally wrong that this state of affairs should continue for more than 40 years after Nehru passed away.

One can presume that one of the reasons is that individuals or institutions interested in these files are mainly academics and researchers who have no means to begin a long drawn battle with the authorities. And obviously, from Nehru's family side, successive repositories enjoyed their control over modern history of India too much to surrender their inherited prerogative.

It is said that Rajiv Gandhi (and it is to his merit) once tried to give some access to the Papers on a "selective basis" to researchers. Unfortunately, the move was blocked by some all-powerful babus. This is another compounding of the problem.

Recently, a senior Indian journalist (he was also a member of the Rajya Sabha at that time) wrote about his experience when he tried to consult the famous Papers.

He wanted to research on the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten. He had diligently written to Ms Sonia Gandhi for prior permission to consult three sets of documents, lying in the almirahs of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi. The "owner's permission" was granted to go through one set of files, in which, unfortunately, there was nothing on Mountbatten!

The former MP complained that he was not allowed to see the two other sets, while in the same reading room, some foreign scholars were able to study the old letters and notes he had requested. "The foreigners are more reliable," the journalist was told by the library staff. Whether the story is true or not is beside the point. The Public Records Act states that 30-year-old "unclassified public records" should be made available to any bona fide research scholar.

I have experienced myself the difficulty to access these historical documents. It is very simple: If you do not have connections to the Nehru family, you will never be able to study Nehru's Papers. For years I have personally tried to consult documents on Tibet and Kashmir but was never allowed. I was possibly suspected of belonging to a new caste of "not-fully-foreigner" or "semi-Indian", having stayed in India for too long! Anyhow, it is regrettable that the former member of the Rajya Sabha did not take the matter to Parliament and ask embarrassing questions of the Government and the Opposition. It is not in India's interest to hide its history. Perhaps India has not always been as shining as today, but every nation has ups and downs in its history and it is important to know about the darker "patches". My country, France, was not glowing before the decolonisation. However, the younger generation today is happy to know what happened in Algeria or elsewhere during France's "colonial" past. What is the future for a nation which has no access to its past?

So the question remains: How is it possible that 55 years after Independence, Nehru's official correspondence still "belongs" to his family? As a remedy, the journalist suggested a PIL. It is probably a solution. In the US, it worked fairly well and I admire Americans for this at least: Individuals and NGOs have been able to fight for the full implementation of their Freedom of Information Right.

Today, India is often compared to China. The irony is Beijing has recently opened its Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives. The first researcher is said to have discovered

amazing facts about the diplomatic negotiations between the Communist Party and the American Ambassador to China, John Leighton Stuart, soon after the fall of Nanjing to the Communists in April 1949.

In India, the historic papers of the first Prime Minister of India are "owned" by a private individual, giving no opportunity to sincere researchers to write knowledgeably about important subjects like Kashmir or Indo-China relations. We can hope that whatever be the result of the elections, Ms Gandhi will have the grace (or at least the good sense) to return to India what belongs to India. In doing so, she will certainly enhance her image and show her respect for India's past.